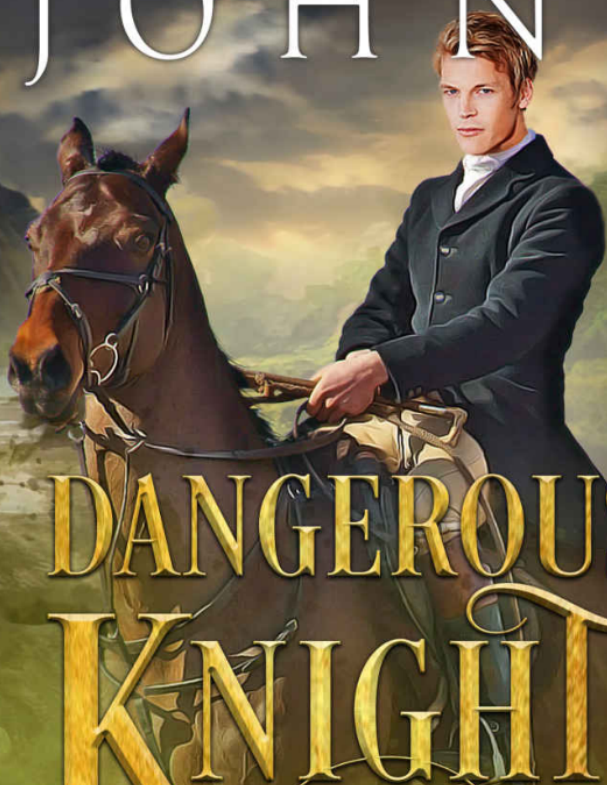


ELIZABETH
JOHNS



DANGEROUS
KNIGHT

Gentlemen
of Knights
Book Six



DRAGONBLADE PUBLISHING

Dangerous Knight

**Gentlemen of Knights
Book Six**

Elizabeth Johns



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Chapter One

“Wake up, you big oaf.” Jack heard Philip’s voice somewhere above him at the same time he felt the poke in the ribs. Jack proceeded to turn over and pull the pillow over his head, hoping Philip would go away and leave him to his dreams of a buxom red-headed opera singer.

“Do you think I would disturb your sleep if there was not a good reason?” Philip drawled as he drew the curtains open wide.

Jack pulled the pillow from his face. “No, my lord,” he taunted.

“Call me that again and you will not dream of actresses or opera dancers ever again.”

Jack frowned. “How did you know?”

Philip smirked.

“What is so important that you must disturb me at this ungodly hour?” In fact, Jack had no idea what time it actually was, but the sun was shining brightly through the window, offending his eyes.

“I will not deign to remark upon that errant observation. The commander would like to see us at once, so, regardless of our holiday, we go.”

Jack threw back his covers and Philip turned away. Jack chuckled. “So modest you are.”

“Modesty is a virtue,” Philip murmured. “I am merely saving myself from further nightmares.”

Jack quickly splashed his face with the water in the basin, shaved and dressed in his worn day uniform.

Once Jack was attired, they made their way through the luxuriously appointed hotel—or townhouse as their countrymen would call it—Wellington had purchased in Paris. It was a welcome change from the tents in the field. It was one perquisite of being on Wellington’s staff, that if there was a luxury to be had they were also welcome to enjoy it. They worked hard when it was necessary, but they also played very hard.

Philip gave a quick rap on the imposing wooden door leading to

Wellington's office.

"Enter."

Both gentlemen entered the room and stood at attention before their commander.

"At ease, for goodness' sake," Wellington said, waving them into a chair. They were often informal with him, since they were in close quarters so often, and of all things, Wellington disliked being toadied to. Nonetheless, when he summoned you, you stood to attention.

Jack relaxed a bit.

Wellington set down the documents he was studying.

"Good morning. How would a trip to England take your fancy?"

"Are you truly asking for an opinion or are you telling us we are going to visit our homeland?" Jack asked.

Wellington chuckled. "The latter, of course. Prinny has asked for a few names of brave soldiers to knight followed by some grand victory celebration he is to hold in Hyde Park."

Philip Everleigh cursed.

"Just so," Wellington agreed. "At least you will be able to report to your father in person this time."

The marquess expected personal reports on his son on a regular basis. It was the source of great amusement among Philip's friends. Jack suppressed a snicker.

"What of you, Owens? Have you anyone to visit?"

"Other than a crotchety old grandmother with a dilapidated estate, sir? No, no one at all."

Wellington raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. Everyone was used to Jack's glib and often sarcastic tongue, yet on this occasion Jack had not been exaggerating. His grandmother was a miserly old witch and had allowed the Owens estate to fall into ruin. He would be pleased if she took it with her when she died. Perhaps she would leave it to her cats. It was certainly something she would take pleasure in doing.

"When do we leave?" Everleigh asked.

"I have already sent word to Major Knight and Major Lloyd. You will meet at Le Havre and sail home together from there."

"Felix will be Knight the Knight. How charming," Jack muttered, earning him another look from his commander.

"Quite."

Did no one else see the humor in that? Jack wondered.

"I know I may trust the four of you to represent my army well at the celebrations. You all look well in uniform and dance well. Owens, you

will need to mind your tongue.”

“Of course, sir,” Jack responded quickly. It was the usual. Dress well, dance well, charm the ladies and act as though war was an extension of Polite Society instead of unfathomable brutality. In actuality, there was great irony in the fact that people adored a man in uniform, yet when he returned maimed from fighting for their country, they shunned him.

Wellington was handing Philip packets of documents. “You might as well see these delivered to the War Office yourselves.”

“Yes, sir,” Philip answered as Wellington piled their arms high with dispatches.

“And I expect you both to enjoy your time. You do deserve these commendations.”

“Thank you, sir,” Philip answered, clicking his heels together.

“Does it come with a prize reward?” Jack jested.

It earned him another look of exasperation from Wellington. “You do realize, Owens, that if you were ever taken prisoner, the enemy would cut out your tongue, England’s secrets be damned?”

“Yes, sir,” Jack answered standing sharply upright and clicking his heels.

Wellington shook his head. “I will miss it nevertheless. Be gone with you both.”

Once out of reach of Wellington’s ears, Jack sighed heavily.

“What? You do not wish for leave and England’s green shores?”

Jack shrugged. “There is little there for me to long for. You know as well as I that there are thousands of soldiers more deserving of knighthood than you and I.”

“Oh, but we are the pretty faces who will make them feel better about themselves.”

They walked through the great hall to the staircase leading to the bedchambers. “If you are knighted, what will you be called? Sir Lord Philip? Or will it be Lord Sir Philip?”

“Leave off, Owens,” Philip growled. He was the second son of a Marquess, but did not like to be known by his honorific. “Captain Everleigh as always,” he snapped.

“I know, I know.” Jack waved his hands in mockery. “You are a soldier, not a debutante.”

“How have you managed to stay alive this long?” Philip turned to ask when they reached their doors.

“An excellent question,” Jack replied. “One you ask at least once a day.”

"It will be good to see Felix again," Philip remarked. "And Catalina."
"What do you know of this other fellow?"

"Very little. He is very secretive. I cannot imagine he will be thrilled with the prospect of being on display in London," Philip answered.

Jack snorted. "I have little doubt it will be quite the exhibition."

"Indeed. I imagine my parents will be beside themselves. Expect a ball in our honor," he warned.

"At least I will not have anyone fighting over me," Jack offered, with a shudder of sympathy.

"It is a mixed blessing, to be sure. If only I did not have to pretend so when I am home. My mother would wrap me in cotton wool and never let me out of her sight."

That sounded horrible to Jack, but he had never had such a relationship with his mother.

"We might as well enjoy a good luncheon before we leave," Philip said as he opened his door.

"I suppose we have tempted fate with this luxury for too long," Jack agreed as he opened the door to his own handsome chamber.

Philip slapped him on the shoulder. "Cheer up. You can stay with me at Everleigh House. I am certain my mother would adore having a personable bachelor under her roof."

"Not a chance, old friend."

"Very well, but you will not abandon me to my fate entirely. At least my mother boasts an excellent chef."

"I can always be tempted with food," he called as Philip went to pack his own trunks. Neither of them kept a batman because their commissions were frequently too covert to vouchsafe the extra person. Jack had never minded seeing for himself.

His trunks were packed long before it was time to leave, so he sat on the bed wondering what would await him back home. He could not be more shocked at the news he had been chosen to be knighted, but it really made no difference in the long run. He would still be Captain Owens and still be a career military man. His grandmother would be delighted if she knew, but he would never tell. It amused him greatly to think of keeping that a secret from her.



London at last. Kate had dreamed of this moment for years, but the old witch had determined to live forever to spite everyone who knew her.

Now, all Kate had to do was find the solicitor and have her funds released to her. Then she could go about her merry way, finally beginning her life at the ripe old age of twenty. After she finished at school, she had discovered she possessed a guardian, in the form of a Mrs. Owens, a cousin to her dear mama. Upon arrival at that lady's estate, which was a monstrous, gothic-looking pile, Kate had found her to be an invalid and a very unkind person.

'Twas putting it mildly, she thought now. There had been scarcely any servants there to care for the estate or Mrs. Owens' person and she had been confined to bed, with only a maid and a cook to be found. Not being more than gently bred, Kate had not been accustomed to a high standard of living, but even she realized the house had fallen into rack and ruin.

Three years she had stayed, and during that time had brought the house back to life. For *three years* she had managed the house and the estate—and kept a wide berth of the old lady, whose first words to Kate had been, “You look like a tart.”

Then she had harumphed and walked off.

Kate stepped down from the stage coach and for some minutes watched the world go by. The streets were crowded with carts and carriages, the pavements crowded with pedestrians and vendors and a cacophony of chaotic noise funneled into a dull roar about her. It was fantastic. She had thought her guardian would have brought her to London straight from school, where Kate could have practiced all she had learned on how to be a proper lady. She would have made a splendid marriage and be the mother of a couple of babies by now.

Now, now, she chastised herself. She at once felt like an old maid *and* could not imagine being beholden to anyone.

The estate she had lovingly brought back to life would now go to the witch's grandson, who was, apparently, some officer in Wellington's army. He had not returned after the lady's death and Kate was tired of waiting. She had prepared a letter to send to Captain Owens, with details of how she had made Winterbourne prosperous again. All she wanted was her freedom, and her funds which had been put into to trust upon her parents' death.

The miserly old lady had refused to release her or to give her any further details. Kate prayed her funds had not been wasted by the bedridden old harridan, and yet she could find no evidence that the lady had done so. She certainly had not spent the funds on extravagancies.

Kate had allowed herself the steward and housekeeper's meager

salaries until recently, when she had found replacements, and she had saved every penny. The villagers had been so grateful to have someone taking care of the property that they had not balked at her being female. All of this she had taken upon herself and done behind Mrs. Owens' back, because it would have been a sin not to.

Now, however, it was time to take her life back; the life her parents would have wanted for her.

"Pardon me, miss, what should I do with your trunks?"

Kate started. She had not realized she had been daydreaming in the middle of the posting-inn yard.

"I will need a cart and driver," she said, handing him a coin.

"Yes, miss." He tipped his felt hat and hurried off.

Kate worried her lip, afraid the solicitor would not be available, although she had sent word to him that she was coming. While she had funds enough to live on for a while, they would not last indefinitely unless she took employment. She was not yet sure whether she should go to a hotel or boarding house, and hoped the solicitor could advise her. Therefore it was with great relief, some half an hour later, when she was shown into the offices of Wilson and Schuster, Esquires.

"Good morning, Miss... Harrington? I was expecting Mr. Harrington."

"Yes, I understand. We are one and the same. I have not lied to you, but I deliberately did not make my sex known. I assumed you would not deal with me."

"Well, I must say, I am certainly surprised, but if you are the one who convinced Mrs. Owens to properly manage her estate, then I can only commend you." Mr. Wilson even looked like the commonplace solicitor who appeared over-fed and over-comfortable in a luxurious office, accustomed to toadying to the *ton's* elite.

Kate inclined her head. She had expected resistance.

"Please, have a seat and tell me what I may do for you." He extended a fat hand out to indicate a plump-cushioned armchair.

"In truth, sir, my full name is Catherine Harrington Rafferty."

Kate waited for the man to piece together the fragments of her identity.

His gaze narrowed as his pince-nez slipped down his nose. "You are Mrs. Owens' ward?"

"Indeed, but hopefully no more. Her death releases me, does it not? I should like to claim my inheritance and make my own decisions."

"I see." He cleared his throat awkwardly.

"Mrs. Owens' grandson, who is her sole heir, has not yet returned from the Peninsula for the reading of the Will, despite several notices dispatched informing him of the lady's death. I assume you are aware he serves with his Majesty's Army?"

"I am aware of that, sir. Are you saying you are unable to release my funds until the Will has been read?"

"That is precisely what I am saying, for it is he who is now your guardian."

Kate sat completely still a moment, hoping she had misheard. She repeated the words to herself, but unfortunately the meaning had not changed.

"I beg your pardon?" she said, unable to prevent the note of disbelief. "I am twenty years old. I have had no association with, nor knowledge of, this grandson."

"I understand your frustration, miss," he said in a condescending tone indicating he sympathized not at all, "but there were some stipulations which tie my hands." He placed those fat hands across his ample girth and leaned back in his chair.

"What am I to do until he decides to grace us with his presence?" Kate knew she sounded like a viper, but she was thoroughly vexed.

The man removed his spectacles, then began to chew on one of the earpieces while his other hands fidgeted with a button. Kate watched him, all the while growing more agitated. Of its own volition, it seemed, her foot began to tap nervously.

"I expect it would be for the best if you were to stay at the townhouse until I receive instructions from Captain Owens."

"There is a townhouse?" She had thought she knew all sources of income for the estate, but this was news to her.

"Aye. The lease came up a month ago and I have not sought new tenants since the Captain has not directed me upon the matter. Since Bonaparte is now imprisoned, I am hopeful the Captain will have time to respond to my letters. You may also return to Winterbourne, of course."

"No, I would prefer to wait to hear from him." To be sure, she had had very little news since the old lady had not taken delivery of any magazines or papers.

He nodded. "There is a skeleton staff there. You will need a maid and a chaperone."

"I would appreciate your assistance in engaging a maid, sir, but I have been managing an estate, a house and an intemperate old woman

for three years. I do not require a chaperone.”

“I understand, but if you hope for future acceptance in Society, you will need an older matron to keep you company, for propriety’s sake.”

Kate bristled at this, but she knew he spoke the truth from her etiquette lessons at school. She had lost hope of any entrée into Society soon after arriving at Winterbourne.

“I know of no one who can fulfill such a role, sir.” Her dreams of Mrs. Owens having been that person had disappeared up the nearest smoking chimney the moment she had arrived in Yorkshire.

“It would be hoped that your guardian would take it upon himself to arrange such a thing, but I will see what I can do. Perhaps the agency may know of a genteel lady looking for a position as a companion.”

“I shall appreciate your assistance in these things.”

The man sighed heavily. “Let us hope that Captain Owens will arrive soon so we may execute the Will. For now, I will send a letter with you to the caretakers of the house here in Town, and I would suggest you keep to yourself until you are properly chaperoned. I will, of course, send candidates to you for final approval. You will be living with them, after all.”

“Thank you,” she responded simply. There was little to be gained in a display of petulance.

“I will have my secretary hail a hackney for you.”

Kate was disappointed to find out she had an unexpected guardian, but at least she had a place to stay while she waited for the matter to be resolved. She hoped Mr. Wilson would not be terribly efficient at finding her a chaperone, because having been quite independent since leaving school, she had no need of one. She intended to make the most of her time in London taking in the sights and all it had to offer. Perhaps she would write to some of those friends from school she had kept in touch with and pay them a visit. Most of them were married, but she still exchanged letters with a few of them.

After her trunks were loaded into the hackney, she climbed in and stared at the grand houses as they passed through an area she suspected was Mayfair. It was yet another thing they had learned whilst in school. She had seen large houses before, but not so many and not so close together. Could it be that her guardian had a house in this part of Town? She supposed it was possible, but after the way Winterbourne had been neglected, she had not expected it. However, if it was leased and overseen by the solicitor, perhaps it was fit to live in.

The hack stopped before a white stone terraced house reaching

several stories high. It was not precisely a mansion, but it was a very well-appointed house with a red door and boxes of matching red flowers hanging from the windowsills. The entire street was made up of such houses. Kate thought if the inside was as pleasing as the outside, it would do very well indeed. She held the letter of introduction from the solicitor in one hand as she stepped down from the equipage, steadying herself with the other.

She went to knock on the door and found she was nervous despite her letter of introduction. Would the servants be so used to tenants that it mattered not who lived there? Or would they treat her poorly because she was alone?

She had to start as she meant to go on; she knew that as well as anyone after her time at Winterbourne. There was nothing for it but to enjoy her sojourn while she could. If only her new guardian would stay away long enough.



Chapter Two

Jack had not returned to England in three years and he would not have come now save for Wellington's orders. There was certainly nothing left for him at home.

When he and Everleigh had delivered their commander's dispatches to the War Office, he had been handed a packet of letters in exchange. He had not bothered to read them all. As the first one requested his presence at his earliest convenience and the offices of the signatory were less than a mile from the War Office, he headed in that direction. Jack checked the direction on the letter and confirmed he was at the correct address, although he could have found it without any help. The plain stone building with the scutcheon bearing the legend Wilson and Schuster, Esquires could not have been more in keeping with his expectations.

He was admitted by a neat but plain-looking secretary with plain brown hair, a plain brown suit and spectacles sliding off the end of a hooked nose.

"Captain Owens to see Mr. Wilson."

"Yes, of course. Come right this way, sir, if you will."

He was shown into an office which also proclaimed the profession. Dark paneled walls frowned upon a large, matching desk with leather chairs that faced a large, balding man behind it.

He stood up when Jack entered. "Captain Owens. May I offer my condolences on the loss of your grandmother? However, I am pleased you have returned safely to our shores."

"Thank you," Jack replied, shocked by the news.

What else was there to say? The old witch had finally died. Strangely, he did not feel relieved. Just like in school when the other boys had looked forward to holidays, he had never wanted to return home to the mean, cold person who was supposed to care about him.

"Please be seated and we will proceed."

Jack had difficulty paying attention to the pages and pages of legal

hyperbole. He simply wanted the matter over with so he could sell the property and get on with choosing his next commission and rejoining Wellington in Paris.

"This is where it becomes interesting," Mr. Wilson said, the change in intonation snapping Jack from his wayward thoughts.

"The property is not to be sold in less than five years from the date of my death," she writes."

"What?" Jack asked rudely, his incredulosity getting the better of his manners. The knowledge that he was to inherit the dilapidated property had already been a millstone around his neck—and now he could not be rid of it? This was beyond anything.

"Unless..." The solicitor cleared his throat. "There is one peculiar condition, sir."

Jack waited for the axe to fall, because it could be nothing good at all.

"There is a certain lady, whom you could marry."

"Marry," he parroted, reflecting that of course, such a clause would be just like his grandmother.

"Yes, her ward, who, incidentally, is now your ward." The man looked down at the paper through the spectacles on the end of his nose. "A Miss Catherine Rafferty, who is a relation from your grandmother's side of the family."

"I beg your pardon! That cannot be legal! I have never heard of such a person!"

"I assure you, it very much is. She was your grandmother's niece's daughter." The solicitor sat back in his chair and folded his hands over his ample girth. His expression was a mixture of amusement and sympathy.

"My fifth cousin twice removed?" he muttered sarcastically. Jack shot up out of his chair and began to pace about the small room. "But I must return to my duties. How am I to care for a property that has no income!"

"I would not say no income," Mr. Wilson corrected.

"The place was in a ruinous state when last I saw it. Do you mean to tell me a miracle has occurred in the past three years?"

"I suppose you could call it a miracle. Miss Rafferty has been acting as steward and housekeeper and, from my understanding, has improved the property considerably. It is even turning a profit again, which has not been the case since your grandfather was alive."

Jack could not control the groan that came from his person. The

thought of making a trip to Yorkshire, not only to meet his ward but also deal with estate business, was not in his plans for this short visit to England.

"Here are the reports. Miss Rafferty has left them in surprisingly good order. If you would like my firm to continue overseeing estate affairs, we would be pleased to. Wilson and Schuster has taken care of the Owens family for decades."

Jack did not bother responding. If the firm had taken such good care, then why had the estate been neglected in the first place? And how had his grandmother acquired a ward of whom he had never heard a word? These were exactly the manipulations the old witch had thrived on, and now she thought to torture him from the grave.

"Wait. Did you say she left the reports in good order? Does that mean she is no longer overseeing the estate?"

"That is correct, sir. As it happens, she was here herself, not even a fortnight past, hoping to secure her funds and become independent. She was none too pleased, I believe, to discover she had another guardian."

"The feeling is quite, quite mutual," Jack murmured. "Is she aware of the stipulation my grandmother placed upon me to marry her?"

The solicitor reddened. "I did not feel it was my place to inform her of that fact before you knew of it yourself, sir. After all, it is not a stipulation upon her, but you."

"I see. And if I choose to release her from my guardianship?"

"That is your choice, of course, but it will require you to maintain the property for the next five years."

"Where is this ward of mine now?"

"I sent her to the townhouse, since the lease had expired. I assumed you would not wish her out upon the town with no chaperone."

"She is at the townhouse, you say? With no chaperone?"

"Indeed." The man seemed pleased with his good judgement. Jack could not even remember where the townhouse was. He vaguely remembered going there as a child.

Taking up the folders full of reports, he nodded to the portly solicitor and left the office.

He began walking away from the building and for some time he neither knew where to, nor cared. He was more stunned by this news than any gunfire or cannon shot he had faced in battle. How could his grandmother have a ward he had never heard of? And how could she shackle him with five more years of a neglected estate? His career was only beginning to flourish and now he would be encumbered with

mounds and mounds of debt merely to keep the estate out of ruin. He could not credit that a young ward—and a female at that—had managed to turn that pile of manure into anything remotely profitable.

There was nothing to be done but go there and see what could be salvaged and economized upon whilst he was away. Perhaps he could put the ward into school somewhere, for he could not exactly take her with him. Clearly, she was not a close relation or his grandmother would not have tried to foist her on to him and machinate a marriage between them. Why would he wish to marry when he could not even afford to maintain an estate?

The last place he wanted to go was Yorkshire; even thinking of it left a bitter taste in his mouth.

For the love of all that was holy, he was a well-respected spy! He was not about to give up a life of intelligence to become a farmer!

He would, however, need some time to sort through his affairs, which meant he would not be able to return to Paris soon. To be honest, he reflected, he liked his position on Wellington's staff, but he would have to beg for mercy for the nonce. Surely, he could set things in order within a month at the most? He would head to Yorkshire as soon as the victory celebrations concluded.

His friends would not believe the vitriol flowing through his veins at the moment! Jack was famous for his dry humor and wit, and ability to make light of the darkest situation.

Apparently, he was to get to his just desserts, because the world was clamping down on him like a vice with poisonous teeth. There was no humor to be found in any part of this situation. What kind of sick human being would saddle a ward with a guardian such as him? It was a worse nightmare than the Gothic novels could conjure.

He tried to imagine some situation where he might want to marry his ward, besides it being very ill form. If anyone was young enough to be a ward, it meant they were a spotty-faced brat and a poor relation.

"The devil!" he shouted as fat raindrops began to fall and he realized he had wandered far from his destination. "Welcome home!" he added with maniacal laughter. Besides a ward, he could not believe Winterbourne would be anything but vermin-infested with holes in the roof—one directly over his moldy bed of lumpy straw—and his ward actually a ghost that haunted the hall at night. He cackled. What of his tenants? Were they all starving and plague-ridden? Perhaps that was going a bit far, but it made Jack feel better to imagine the worst.

He shook his head and turned his attention toward finding this

townhouse he had forgotten about.



Kate was having a marvelous time. Mr. Wilson had found her a maid who was near to her own age, and they were getting along quite well.

Kate had been in Town for over a week, and she and Simpson had been almost everywhere from Kew Gardens to the Tower, as if racing against the time when a chaperone would be found to suppress her freedom. She had little intention of remaining once Mr. Wilson had heard from her guardian and her funds had been released to her in full.

Today she intended to visit one of her friends from school. Lady Maria Lloyd was not a terribly pretty girl, but she was always kind and shared Kate's sense of humor.

"Do you think the blue dress, miss?" Simpson asked, holding up a lovely medium shade of sprigged muslin that matched Kate's eyes perfectly. She had spent wantonly on a few dresses this week, thinking she might have need of them wherever she decided to make her home.

"The blue is perfect."

Simpson seemed to have a gift for dressing hair as well. Kate's hair was on the red side of auburn and was thick and heavy. Mrs. Owens had always insisted she hide it under a cap and she could not help but feel somewhat conspicuous with it uncovered and dressed so beautifully.

"Simpson, you work miracles, but I am not attending a ball, only luncheon!" Kate teased.

"Oh, no, miss. This is just right for the daytime. If you were going to a ball, I would wind ribbons or jewels or flowers into it!"

"Your talents will be wasted on me, I am afraid. I have no plans to be a grand Society lady."

"It's no matter, miss. Your hair is a treat to dress, it is."

"Who did you work for before coming here? You are not so old as to have had a great many positions."

"No, miss. I was being trained for a duke's daughter, but the duchess did not think I was good enough."

"Her loss is my gain," Kate said, smiling at the young, waif-like girl and her good fortune.

"Good riddance, I say. Begging your pardon, miss. My tongue runs on with me sometimes. You are very easy in your manner," Simpson said as she placed a straw bonnet with matching ribbon atop Kate's curls.

Soon Simpson and Kate were in a hired hack on their way to Mottram Place. It was not a great distance, but the house was even grander than the Owens' townhouse. It was a mansion rather more like Winterbourne, but in the middle of Town. Lady Maria must be well to pass, indeed. She had never treated Kate in a condescending manner, but seeing the white stone house with its large circular drive and large stone wall, surrounding what must be an extensive garden, was a little overawing.

She paid the driver and climbed down from the carriage. A butler opened the door before she knocked and ushered her inside, Simpson following dutifully behind her.

"Lady Maria is in the drawing room, miss. I will show your maid to the servant's quarters where she may await your pleasure," he declared in a stately tone.

As they approached the drawing room, a footman opened a large door and showed her inside.

"Miss Rafferty," he announced then Maria requested tea.

Goodness! Kate had hardly expected this formality for an afternoon visit. Maria was already in the drawing room with another lady, presumably her mother. At Kate's entrance, Maria walked toward her with her arms outstretched.

"Kate! I am so glad you have finally come to visit. It has been an age!" Taking Kate's hands, Maria pulled her forward to kiss each cheek.

Kate could not help but smile with pleasure. "It has been three years," she replied—not that she was counting.

"Come and meet my mother," Maria said, leading her across the room. "Kate, this is my mother, Lady Mottram. Mama, this is my dearest friend from school, Kate Rafferty."

Kate remembered her manners and curtsied. The older lady smiled kindly and held out a hand. Kate accepted it and the lady gave it a light squeeze. "You are very welcome, Kate. We have heard so much about you, but please sit down and tell us what you have been doing these past three years."

Kate was hesitant to tell anyone her true situation, but she took a seat.

"I am certain it would be far more entertaining to hear of Lady Maria's adventures," Kate said as she accepted a dainty porcelain cup of rich Darjeeling.

The countess waved her hand dismissively. "Maria has been flirting with every eligible bachelor to cross her path, yet dawdling and not

settling on anyone.”

“Mama,” Maria scolded. “You know that is not true.” Maria looked at Kate. “If you had seen the gentleman who offered for me, you would not wonder. As soon as someone I can admire offers, I will be more than happy to accept.”

The countess made a noise in her throat. “Your father may not be patient for as long as that might take.”

“Enough of me!” Maria said hastily in a falsely gay tone. “Your letters came from Yorkshire, but you said very little about what you were doing there. I fully expected you to join me for the Season after school was over!”

“It turned out that my guardian had other ideas. She was an invalid and quite particular in the end.”

“She has passed away?”

“Indeed. I came to London to see her solicitor as soon as mourning was over, only to be informed I have another guardian!”

Maria and her mother both exclaimed at the same time,

“You poor dear!”

“I beg your pardon!”

Kate could only shake her head. “Apparently he is serving in the army and the solicitor has thus far been unable to reach him.”

“The post is very difficult. The army moves about a great deal and letters must be delivered to so many people. We have received letters from Gabriel posted six months prior!” the countess remarked.

Kate worried her bottom lip, then caught herself and stopped. That did make sense. Perhaps she should not be so hasty to judge Captain Owens.

“I have just received word that Gabriel is to be coming home for some victory celebration. Perhaps he might know your guardian and can take a letter back to him.”

“That would be much appreciated, thank you,” Kate answered, while she wondered why her own guardian would not be returning, if the war was over.

“You must attend the celebrations with us!” Maria exclaimed, as though the idea had just come to her.

“Oh, I could not!”

“Why ever not?” Maria looked to her mother for guidance. “Why ever not, Mama?”

“I had no thought of having a Season,” Kate explained, “and especially not now, since I will not come into my inheritance as soon as

I had thought. Besides, I have no chaperone or benefactor to speak of.”

“Well, that is easily remedied,” the countess said kindly. “Maria’s cousin was married last Season and she would enjoy having a friend to bear her company.”

Kate could see where Maria had inherited her kindness. There was not a malicious bone in either of the ladies’ bodies.

“You are too kind, but I cannot impose in such a manner, especially when my circumstances are unknown to me.”

The countess waved her hand dismissively. “That is of little importance. I can ask his lordship to look into your situation for you. You are clearly gently bred, and any friend of Maria’s is very welcome. If you find you are uncomfortable, then you can at least have enjoyed a visit together!”

Maria clapped her hands. “It will be such fun to be together again!”

“There is also the matter of my wardrobe...” Kate tried to add an element of reason.

“You look very smart today,” the countess remarked approvingly.

“I did purchase a few gowns. My old guardian believed I should dress as a servant in mourning.”

“We will see what can be done. Certainly, Maria has more gowns than she needs and my maid is a wonder with a needle. We can remake a few to cover your needs through the remainder of the Season without any hardship at all.”

“There you are! You can have no objection. We used to share gowns at school, so you know we are of a size,” Maria argued.

That much was true. “I feel like Cinderella with a fairy godmother!”

The countess laughed. “You will not be required to scrub floors and wait on us, to be sure. I am not one to speak ill of the dead, but I think your guardian is better off where she is!”

Kate could only agree. She had relished her newfound freedom in the past week, but could she step into Society? She could hardly represent herself as an equal to Lady Maria or claim any wealth or dowry without her guardian’s approval. What a pickle this was!

“I will agree to attend some events with you, but not everything, not unless His Lordship is able to ascertain the circumstances of my inheritance. It could be anywhere from 100 pounds to 10,000 pounds. I have no idea and therefore do not wish to misrepresent myself.”

“That is very obliging of you, my dear. However, with your looks, if you do not mind me saying so, I think many gentlemen will be willing to overlook that fact. Besides, it will keep fortune hunters at bay and

that is a very good thing.”

Kate could only smile and hope she was not treading into deep water with no notion of how to swim. If only her guardian would return!



Chapter Three

By the time Jack cried defeat and took himself off to the Cavalry and Guards' Club to look through the documents there for the address to the townhouse, then to find the said property, he was in no mood to greet an unknown ward. Why was it that all the houses in the area looked the same? He stayed at the club that night, yet was in no state of mind to enjoy himself. He requested a tray to be sent to his room and a bottle of brandy.

The next morning, though, he was little better rested, having wondered what he was to do with a ward who was apparently old enough and competent enough to have handled his grandmother's estate for the past three years. Wilson had mentioned that, but it had not fully sunk into his consciousness at the time. He had been too dumbfounded by the news that he could not sell the estate unless he married the ward.

He had a ward!

Please let her be a reasonable chit.

What he really ought to do was read through the papers and become fully acquainted with the situation. How long was this person to be his ward? He could not actually contemplate marrying her, if for no other reason than he refused to allow his grandmother to control him from the grave! Besides, he had never met a female he cared to be shackled to for more than a few hours. At least no unmarried ones. There were a few good ladies who followed the drum, he supposed, but they were a rarity. His life was far too complicated to take on that burden.

The only thing for it was to go to Yorkshire, discover the condition of the estate, hire a competent steward, and settle the ward in some situation that would satisfy them both. He eyed the packet of reports with distaste. He spent a good deal of time writing reports in the army; the last thing he wanted to do was read them. So much for a holiday!

Opening the satchel, he saw that they went back five years. He knew very well the condition the place had been in when he had left, so he began with the latest. He might as well know where things stood now,

he mused ruefully. First, he began with the last monthly report, written in a neat, firm hand. There were over fifty pigs and three hundred sheep after the spring lambs; new thatch for ten of the tenant cottages and a drainage ditch installed between two of the farms to help with flooding.

Jack frowned but turned to the ledger. Neat columns of debits and credits swam before his eyes, and at the very end, a positive balance.

Could it be possible?

He went back to the beginning, and for five years past there were hardly any entries. Even to his untrained eye it was clear the old steward had been pocketing any profits. Yet as the years passed, he could see where the ward had taken over and not only improved the estate, but made it profitable.

There was nothing left for it but to go and meet her—after he had breakfasted, of course.

When Jack arrived in the dining room, he was surprised to find Everleigh there.

“That bad at home already?”

Philip cast him a look of disgust. “You have no idea.”

“Actually, I think I can up you one or two,” Jack said as he took a seat across from Philip.

“Shock me,” his friend said as he patted his lips with a napkin and sat back in his chair.

“I have a *ward*,” Jack said slowly, letting the word sink in.

Philip frowned. “I am glad I was not drinking anything. That is far worse than dealing with overly affectionate parents and siblings,” he conceded. “What are you going to do with her? I assume it is a she, or you would not be so appalled.”

“You surmise correctly.”

“An antidote, is she?”

“How could she be otherwise?”

“You have not met her?” Philip queried in an accusing tone.

“I intend to go there as soon as I have finished eating. I only found out about her last night.”

Everleigh looked skeptical. “Where is this ward of yours?”

“At the townhouse I also inherited. Apparently, she has been nursing my grandmother, which makes her a saint. It seems she has brought the estate out of dun territory as well.”

“If she is old enough to do those things, then why is she your ward?”

“My question precisely, and hopefully soon to be answered. Would you care to come along for the fun?”

“Oh, I would, but only if you agree to dinner and the theater.”

“Fair enough,” Jack agreed. Anything would be better than facing an unknown female alone.

Everleigh was driving his curricle and they rode to the address on Half Moon Street.

“Not a bad thing to inherit,” Philip remarked, looking up at the house as his tiger jumped down and he handed the man the reins.

“I had forgotten about it,” Jack admitted.

“I might have to stay here with you,” Philip went on as they climbed the steps to the neat, white stone house with the cast-iron railing and red door.

Jack stopped in front of said door. “Do I knock? It is my own house.”

Philip twisted his lips thoughtfully. “I would probably knock if I had not been here in years. You do not know what lies behind the door.”

Jack knocked.

The door opened and thankfully the manservant was known to him. “Wethersby?” Jack asked, recognizing the face.

“Master Jack, is it you?” The butler held the door wide open to allow them into the entrance hall, which was narrow with a staircase against one wall that rose to all four stories.

“How do you come to be here?”

Wethersby looked at the floor. “The steward dismissed Mrs. Owens’ household about three years past. A few of us were fortunate enough to find positions here.”

Jack cursed.

“No one blames you, sir. If you don’t mind my saying so. The old lady may have been bound to her bed, but she still...” his voice trailed off as though he thought better of whatever name he was about to call her.

“She was determined enough to make everyone miserable, I am well aware, but I knew how she was and should have stood up to her.”

“Miss Rafferty did, in her own way.”

“My ward?”

“Yes, sir. The old lady would never have given permission, but Miss Rafferty did what she could behind her back, so to speak.”

Jack’s admiration reluctantly grew for this paragon of a ward he had suddenly acquired. Hopefully, he could find a way to break the guardianship without leaving her in a bad situation. “I have seen the miracle she has wrought on the estate books. I have yet to go to Winterbourne, however.”

"The little I know, I have heard from Mrs. Dewey, who is still there."

"Yes, well... I will thank my ward when I have the chance to meet her. Would you be so kind as to send her down and a pot of coffee thereafter?"

"The coffee is no problem, sir, but I am afraid Miss Rafferty is not here."

Jack had gone to look through to the back window that led to what looked like a small garden of Eden, but he turned at those words. "When do you expect her back?"

"She did not say, sir."

Jack flashed a look at Everleigh, who gave a little shrug.

"Very well, send her in when she does return."

"I do not think you understand, sir. She was here for a week or so, but she packed her belongings and left."

"And when was this?" All of a sudden, Jack had no patience for his wayward ward regardless of the fact that she had done his work for him. He wanted this matter over and done with as soon as possible.

"Just last evening sir. A grand carriage took her away."

Jack could not think of anything good that might have come to his ward by leaving in a grand carriage. Had she already found a protector? There was no possibility such a carriage belonged to the Winterbourne estate. He would eat his right toe if he thought there was a single equipage that still functioned in that coach-house.

"That will be all, Wethersby." The butler withdrew and Jack could only stare at Philip.

"Perhaps she left a note. I would not think she has simply disappeared."

"I hope you are correct. I did not envision my time here to be spent searching for a missing person I have yet to meet," he said dryly.

They looked through the other rooms on that floor—a drawing room, a study, and a dining room. Then they went up a flight of stairs to look through four bedrooms, though two were covered in Holland covers. One of the rooms held a lingering scent of rosewater as though Miss Rafferty had just been there. There was no note, however.

They went into another room which was more masculine – the one Jack would select for himself, he supposed. There was a large four-posted bed, a wardrobe, and a small desk, though there was no sign of anyone having been there for some time.

"No letter." Jack stated the obvious.

"None," Philip agreed.

"I do not think it necessary to lift the floorboards." It was what they would have done were they spying. It was hard not to be suspicious of everything in their line of work.

They returned downstairs to the study, where Weatherby had brought up a fresh pot of coffee. They sat and drank and contemplated. It was strange, being in a house that he owned and yet feeling no attachment to it—which was just as well since he would not be there long.

He set down his empty cup. "There is nothing else to do but return to the solicitor for a description of Miss Rafferty."

"You could hire a Runner," Phillips suggested.

"If I were the lazy sort."

Philip raised his brows at that. Jack did not exert extra effort unless required, but he always did what he must.

"Yes, I would love to proclaim to the world that I not only lost my ward, but I do not know what she looks like."

"It is hardly your fault," Philip argued.

"But it is. Had I done my duty and returned to England during the past three years, I would not be so ignorant."

"You are hardly the first, and it does not sound as though your grandmother warranted any such devotion."

Jack snorted. "No. Rather the opposite."

Philip set his own cup down and placed his hands on his knees before standing. "Then let us go back to the solicitor. We are two of England's finest spies; how hard can it be to find a young girl who is very likely not attempting to disguise herself from us?"

"Very true." How hard could it be?



Kate could not believe how kind the Mottrams were being to her. By the time she had returned with her belongings, Lady Mottram and her maid had already chosen a dozen or so gowns for Kate. She spent the rest of the evening trying them on and suffering the fabric to be pinned for alterations.

The next day, she was taken shopping for new hats, gloves, slippers and all those things her ladyship thought necessary for a young lady to be outfitted properly.

Now she was dressing for the theater, which was something she had always wished to do, but she had never thought it would be in the grand

style, with a prominent family of the Town.

“Lawks, miss, that gown looks a right treat on you!”

“It does look as though it had been intended for me from the beginning. I believe you will have a chance to style my hair like a fine lady after all.”

Simpson smiled and began to do just that.

“Did you know that the son of the house has arrived, miss?”

“I had not heard of his return, no. When was this?”

“A couple of hours ago, miss. He has come back for the victory celebrations.”

“Alas. It is to be quite an event, I hear.”

Maria came through the door at that moment, looking as fresh as a daisy in a pretty gown of jonquil silk with white trimming. Despite her plainness, there was something about her which made her quite beautiful.

“You will put me in the shade!” Maria said, admiring Kate as though she were her own child.

Kate laughed. “Do not be ridiculous. You are a picture of perfection.”

“If I did not love you so, I would be quite jealous,” Maria remarked. “No one will look at me with you nearby.”

“That is not true,” Kate protested. “I have neither your fortune nor your connections, and those are what people really want.”

“If I were given to wagering on such matters, I would bet a great deal that you are wrong. But never mind, we will have a grand time together!”

“Is it true your brother has returned?”

A flash of concern crossed Maria’s face before she masked it. “It is. I shall introduce you when we go downstairs. He is to accompany us tonight.”

Kate could only feel trepidation as Simpson wound a green ribbon through her hair. Of a watered silk, the riband perfectly matched the gown.

Suddenly Kate felt nervous. She may have been taught how to be a lady, but she had not had the opportunity to put it into practice in such a grand fashion. During the last three years she had been a steward and a housekeeper, for goodness’ sake!

“Calm yourself, you will be perfect,” Maria said, as if reading Kate’s mind.

They made their way downstairs and she could hear voices coming from the drawing room. When they entered, there was a handsome

soldier in full regimental dress standing with Lady Mottram and another gentleman whom she assumed to be Lord Mottram.

"There you are!" the countess exclaimed. "Oh, Kate, do you come and meet Gabriel."

Kate had never seen a soldier in full dress regimentals, and it was quite a sight with the bright red jacket adorned with gold trim and ribbons. There certainly was something to be said about a man in uniform, as she had heard many of the girls at school remark. This brother of Maria's certainly shared her features, yet they were extremely handsome on the man. However, there was something not right about him which Kate could not quite put her finger on. He executed a proper bow and gave her a slight smile that did not reach his eyes.

Was he simply of a taciturn nature or was there something disagreeable about Gabriel? Kate was not certain she wished to know. Her immediate reaction was to move closer to Maria.

"Shall we go? You know I abhor crowds," Lord Mottram said, trying to usher them out of the door.

"I shall meet you there," Gabriel remarked.

"Yes, yes, five is a crowd in a carriage," the countess said, though her tone was disappointed.

Kate would have preferred Lord Mottram to go with the son. They had been all that was kind to her, yet she was still not comfortable with these strangers or the grandeur. *It will not be for long*, she reminded herself, wishing the soldier she had encountered this evening was her guardian instead of this cold creature.

Briefly, Kate wondered if her guardian would look the same in his regimentals as the young Mottram, but shook away the thought. She actually had no idea how old her distant cousin was, nor anything about his looks. She did not think he could be greatly older than herself, but she had never asked. Mrs. Owens was wont to fly into a tirade whenever he was mentioned.

It was hard not to think the worst of Captain Owens, since he had neither written nor shown his face in three years, but then Kate reminded herself she would not willingly have visited the old woman either. To be fair, he had been fighting for King and country as well.

As Kate and Maria waited for the countess to be helped into the carriage, Kate thought something might be wrong.

"What is it?" she whispered to Maria.

"It is Gabriel. Something seems different."

So, Kate wasn't imagining her feelings. "He has been at war," she

pointed out.

“Yes, I suppose that is so. He was always such a pleasant fellow before. I would hate to see that changed.”

Kate could not imagine what war must be like, and how the soldiers must feel on returning home. Would they be glad to be home or would they be wretched, returning to supposed normality after what they had done and seen? It was a deep thought Kate had never pondered before. She determined to make an effort to be kind to Gabriel Lloyd. Then she made a little hiss, chastising herself for such silly thoughts. As if he would want to be chatting with the likes of her!

When the town chariot pulled up in front of the theater, she was surprised to see Major Lloyd waiting to hand them down from the carriage and escort them inside. The crowd was not yet thick and they easily made their way inside. When they reached the Mottram box, Kate was glad of being early, for she stared at the grandness with awe. There were some beautiful buildings in Yorkshire, of course, but London was filled with them. Even she had heard about the theaters in London and teemed with excitement to see a real play. It was equally fascinating to watch as members of the *ton* began to arrive. Maria was quite entertaining as she pointed everyone out and made some little comment about them.

“Lady Eugenia Tinsley, née Knight, is newly married and secured the biggest catch on the Marriage Mart last Season.”

Kate thought Lady Eugenia was one of the most beautiful creatures she had ever seen.

“Lady Sutton, the old matron with the large turban sprouting several feathers, is an old biddy but someone to be wary of. Her word is gospel in the *ton*. You would be wise to stay on her good side,” Maria warned.

Kate was quite sure she would not be in the *ton* long enough for that to matter.

“There is Lord Marsden. It appears Lord Philip has also returned home,” Lady Mottram exclaimed.

Kate and Maria turned and her breath caught while Maria audibly gasped. Two soldiers were sitting in a box directly across from them and it was quite clear all the ladies were taken with the new arrivals. Lorgnettes and quizzing glasses rapidly pointed in that direction and fans beat a rapid tattoo in front of many a face.

Major Lloyd made a noise of disgust, if Kate was not mistaken, and quickly excused himself from their box.

“Who is that?” Kate whispered, trying not to stare at the two men

who, even at this distance, exuded an essence of both masculinity and danger.

“The dark one is Lord Philip. I do not know his companion.”

Kate’s eyes were drawn back to the soldiers and her eyes met with the one Maria had referred to as the unknown companion. She shivered unconsciously and barely kept from squirming in her seat.



Chapter Four

Jack did not like being conspicuous, and he and Philip were very, very conspicuous. Yet that was the part they had come to England to play. He spied Felix Knight in the Knighton box, dressed in his regimentals, and Lloyd was almost directly across from them, Jack noticed, as he scanned the crowd. His gaze continued past the box... and he immediately returned it on noticing a ravishing redhead sitting in the same box with Lloyd.

“Who is that?” Jack asked Philip.

Philip followed his gaze and immediately knew to whom Jack was referring.

“I have no idea, but if she is with Lady Maria, then she is off-limits, my friend.”

“I was only asking the question; I doubt she is as fine up close.” Jack held up his hands defensively. “They never are.” As long as she did not belong to Lloyd, he reflected, and that would be the likely answer. Not that Jack was in a position to offer any respectable lady marriage, even if his estate was profitable at the moment. Marriage was a complication his life did not need.

With respect to complications, they had spent the entire day looking for Catherine Rafferty and Jack was already weary of the thought of her. The solicitor had no idea where she might have gone, but he had described a young lady near twenty years of age with blue eyes and auburn hair.

She could not have had much money, so where could she have gone?

Thinking she may have returned to Winterbourne, he had sent a messenger there to inquire, but he could not leave for Yorkshire himself until after the victory celebrations had ended.

“Shall we introduce ourselves in the intermission?” Philip asked.

“There is probably already a line of hopefuls.”

“Very likely, but we might as well try. My mother is friendly with the countess. I suspect there will be invitations if you miss your chance

tonight.”

Jack tried to concentrate on the play—he truly did—but he could not have cared less about Shylock or Edmund Kean, or Shakespeare for that matter. Oh, the Bard’s verse had kept him entertained on lonely nights in his tent, but then there were no other diversions.

“Shall we go? We can enliven a dull evening by finding a drink on the way.”

“I thought you would never ask.” Jack was tired of being stared at; and trying to look dignified in the uncomfortable dress uniform was tiring.

They were stopped three times on their way to the other side of the theater. Twice by sly matrons who had obviously seen them leaving the Everleigh box and wanted to show off their maiden daughters, and another time by old General Maitland, who wanted to reminisce and hear the latest about the wars to take back to his old cronies at the club.

By the time they reached the Mottram box, it was already the intermission and there was a large crowd of gentlemen hoping for entrance.

“I think it is a lost cause tonight, old friend.”

Lloyd raised his glass in greeting and Philip and Jack were at least able to reach his side. In all likelihood he was enjoying this less than they, being of an unsociable nature.

“What is the commotion about?” Philip asked, though he knew full well what was the cause.

Apparently, Lloyd did not buy the subterfuge. “She is an old school friend of my sister’s coming to visit,” he answered.

“You know nothing else?”

“How could I? I met her only minutes before we came here. Truthfully, I do not even recall her name.”

Jack would wager it would be well known before the night was over. There would be bets regarding the lady in the club books by night’s end, both honorable and not.

They stayed several minutes and greeted old acquaintances, but it was clear they would have no luck that night.

Jack had no wish to return to the performance, so he made his excuses and went in search of fresh air for a few moments.

It was a bit much to return to England – the very place he had been fighting for – and be expected to act as though nothing had happened, as though war were some act only found in novels. Jack had been very lucky. He lived dangerously, but had never been wounded. One of his

colleagues, Felix Knight, had been a prisoner of war, yet Jack doubted he told his family of the experience. However, here he was, putting on a good face for Society. Was that not part of why they did what they did, so that their families could have these freedoms? Many soldiers, though they believed in freedom, were not on the battlefield because they really had a choice.

"I am becoming a maudlin!" He scolded himself, then shook his head and went back inside.

The crowd had now cleared from the Mottram box. Jack thought devilishly for a moment, but having decided to return to his own seat, almost bumped into the very person in his thoughts. He did not know why he kept thinking about her when nothing could come of it.

"I beg your pardon," she said, in a deeper voice than he might have expected.

"Tis I who is at fault, miss." He bowed deeply before her. She was far more exquisite up close than he could have created in his dreams. Her bright blue eyes were set off by long, dark lashes and a pert little nose that turned up at the end. Her cheeks were kissed by the faintest of freckles and Jack realized he was staring.

"You are with Lord and Lady Mottram," he remarked stupidly.

"I am," she agreed, with a twinkle in her eyes as if she were toying with him. "And you are a soldier," she said, as if saying something equally droll would make him feel better. But she had not given him the cut direct and walked on past. It was a small glimmer of encouragement.

"Did you also need a break from Shakespeare?" he quipped.

"Certainly, it is not the most soothing entertainment, is it?" she returned.

"It is quite clever, but reading it gives me a headache from the effort of interpreting his meaning."

"Quite," she said, her eyes dancing with amusement.

"I am returned for the victory celebrations," he offered, wondering why he had done so.

"Yes, perhaps I will see you there." She took a step, with the obvious intention to leave, and then stopped. "I thank you for what you do, sir." Then she moved on, leaving a hint of rosewater behind her.

"You are most welcome," he whispered, watching her walk away. It was strange, but he did not think he had ever been thanked before. Usually, it was quite the opposite, especially when they were in foreign lands. A strange sensation filled his chest and he almost ran after her to prolong the feeling. Such stupid rules they were, of Polite Society, that

left him still without an introduction or knowing her name.

Reluctantly, he returned to Philip's family box and sat next to his host.

"A tryst in the corridor?" his friend asked dryly.

"I shall never tell." He wiggled his eyebrows.

He attempted to pay attention to the last act, but his gaze was constantly drawn across to the enchanting redhead. No one seemed to know her name, which only enhanced the mystery and thus the curiosity.

When the play finally ended, Jack could not help searching for her, to no avail. The crowd was more impenetrable than the best infantry square in battle.

"You were not one to make a fool of yourself over some maiden, though I will admit she is quite a taking thing," Everleigh drawled. "You would be bored silly in a fortnight."

"I doubt that," Jack retorted.

Everleigh eyed him suspiciously.

"I happened to speak with her when I came back inside earlier. She is no ninny."

"I see," Philip said knowingly. "So now we search for this mysterious lady in addition to the missing ward?"

Jack snorted. "With respect to the ward, I have half a mind to let be for now. Her money cannot last too long. What then?"

"Do you think she is out for a joyride in London?"

"I do not know her at all, of course, but I suspect if she could manage Winterbourne, then she has her wits about her. It is likely what I would do."

"Yet you know it is not safe for a young female alone in London. It is entirely different from the country."

"Wilson said he found her a maid, so hopefully she has enough wherewithal not to go about alone."

"And if she gets into trouble, whose responsibility is it to help her?" Everleigh persisted.

He was right, curse him. "Very well, it is mine," Jack grumbled. He was thoroughly detesting the idea of chasing anyone anywhere. He had enough to do with this upcoming nuisance of a victory celebration.

"I would give it a couple of days, but then I would call in the Runners. You will not have much time starting from next week, so let's plan it out.

Jack gave a nod of agreement. Catherine Rafferty had better turn up

quickly or when Jack found her, he was likely to strangle her.



Kate was in her bedroom, brushing out her hair, when Maria burst in. She fell onto the chaise longue in a dramatic fashion. “Were those soldiers not delicious?” she asked with a slight giggle.

“I assume you are referring to the ones directly across from us, not your brother?”

“Yes,” she answered wistfully.

Kate bit her lip as she stroked her tresses and then decided to confess. “You remember when I went to the retiring room?”

“Directly after the intermission,” Maria remarked, twisting the ends of her plait around her finger.

“I happened upon the one you did not know.”

Maria sat up, all attention at that news. “You did not tell me!”

“I have not had the chance until now,” Kate defended her silence.

“What was he like up close? What is his name?”

“I did not learn his name. There was no one else about and we were not introduced,” Kate scolded.

“I think I would have been bold enough to tell him anyway,” Maria said with a mischievous grin. “And do not avoid my other question. What was he like up close?”

Kate paused her brush and thought. “He was very handsome, as we suspected, and rather witty in a dry way.” She pursed her lips. “However, I think that is a façade. I sense something darker, more dangerous, beneath the surface.”

Maria squealed. “And you determined all of those without discovering his name or he yours?” she asked skeptically.

“I know it sounds like a bag of moonshine.” Kate held her hands up. “I have always been good at reading people, but perhaps on this occasion I am wrong. It is hard to imagine a soldier being completely immune to the darkness of war, but perhaps he is one of the fortunate few. He is tall and broad, as you would expect, and has a charming scar near his right eye.”

“Did they not look like Lucifer and Michael, next to each other? Light and dark, night and day? I would have much preferred to have turned my glass on them during the performance, but alas, it would never do.”

“No, indeed.” Kate grinned at her friend’s assessment.

“And this light angel was alone?”

“He was.”

“Well, it should be easy enough to get the angel’s name from Gabriel. I know Lord Philip will be at many entertainments because I know his mother. She is one of Mama’s dearest friends. I have known Philip practically from the cradle.”

Kate suspected Maria had a *tendre* for Lord Philip, but she would not say so.

“I know this is horribly selfish of me, but I hope your guardian takes his time in putting in an appearance. I want to keep you as long as I can!”

“Just because he deigns to return does not mean I have to leave,” Kate pointed out. “But at least I would know what my prospects are.”

“I suppose so.” Maria frowned. “I was afraid you would run off to America or Greece or somewhere else.”

Kate laughed. “It has crossed my mind.”

“Please, at least stay for the Season. You never know, you might find a husband. My father has given me an ultimatum, so stay and husband hunt with me,” Maria said, raising her eyebrows. They had been used to laughing together over London’s Marriage Mart and how silly about it some of the girls were.

“I can make no promises, but it looks as though I will be here for a while.”

Maria stood up and walked over to give Kate a hug. “I am thrilled that you are here. We will ask Gabriel about your guardian in the morning.”

“Rest well,” Kate called as Maria left.

The next morning, when Kate and Maria went downstairs, they were surprised to see several bouquets of flowers being delivered.

“These must all be for you,” Maria said. “I am fortunate if I receive one or two after a ball.”

“I very much doubt they are all for me,” Kate responded. “I met only two gentlemen last night.”

“That is because my mother guarded you well in our box. Nevertheless, I guarantee your name is known all over London by now. Come, let us solve the mystery.” Maria went forward and began pulling cards from the arrangements.

She laughed. “See, here you are; I was right.”

To the fairest Miss Rafferty, will you marry me?

Sincerely yours,

Sir Julius Winthrop

“Why, how ridiculous!” Kate exclaimed.

“Mm, as ridiculous as his costumes. Just wait, there is bound to be poetry,” Maria remarked as she plucked the next card from a beautiful arrangement of pink roses.

“Oh, well, I suppose one arrangement for me is not so very odd. It is from Lord Philip, so it means little enough.” Her flushing cheeks betrayed her.

“What does he say?”

“Dearest Lady Maria, I look forward to making your acquaintance again while I am in Town. Your very obedient servant, Philip Everleigh.”

She returned the card to the table. “That means nothing, Kate. He is only being polite and very likely only wishes for an introduction to you.”

“Do not sell yourself short, Maria. I would resent that very much, anyway.”

“On the contrary, I am quite aware that my beauty is not in my looks.”

“Nonsense! You are really quite pretty,” Kate protested.

“Thank you for saying that, my dear, and I do love you so, but I am no fool. I accepted my plainness long ago. I am not ugly, but I am not one to make gentlemen lose their heads over me.”

“And do you think I am?”

Maria gave her a look. “I am quite sure of it, my dear, but part of your beauty is that you do not realize it. It will be quite amusing to watch.”

“And this is said to entice me to stay?” Kate asked with disbelief.

Maria chuckled and moved onto the next arrangement. “Oh, here we have a poem!”

My heart stopped when

I beheld your beauty fair

My breath away you took

“I do not think it amusing at all. I did not even warrant a sonnet. Have they nothing better to do?”

“Of course not,” Maria said. “We should prepare for callers today.”

“I cannot,” Kate argued. “I have no intention of leading anyone

astray.”

“Nonsense. It will be diverting, if nothing else. Come, let us break our fast.”

Maria led Kate into the breakfast room, but the Countess was alone. “Good morning, Mama. Where is Gabriel?”

“He ate early and went out. Some War Office business, I assume.”

“Drat. I had hoped to find out the name of our mysterious officer.”

“The handsome one with Lord Philip? I had thought to call on Lady Marsden today. I am certain she will know since he was sitting in their box.”

“I think we will need to be at home today, Mama. Did you see the flowers in the drawing room?”

“No, I have yet to look in there.” She clapped her hands together. “Perhaps Lord Philip will bring his friend here. I think we should host a ball to welcome the soldiers home,” the countess said.

Kate filled her plate and sat at the table while she listened to Maria and her mother talk, amused by how the lady had swiftly moved from callers to holding a ball.

“I imagine Lady Marsden has already planned one, Mama.”

“Of course, she has, but that does not mean we cannot. At the very least, we must do something because Gabriel is home.”

“He will not appreciate the attention,” Maria remarked before biting into a slice of toast.

“No gentleman ever does, my dear, but he will tolerate it for my sake. Now, is there anyone else in particular we should invite? We must think of Kate as well as yourself.”

“Pray do not think of me at all,” Kate interjected. “Please continue to concern yourself with Maria.”

Maria shot Kate a look of mock betrayal, to which Kate grinned in reply.

Lady Mottram completely ignored them. “It would be lovely to see the two of you with Lord Philip and the other one, assuming he is eligible.”

Maria signaled to Kate to hurry up and then stood quickly as soon as they had finished eating.

“I think we will pay a visit to the shops, Mama.”

The countess was scarcely paying attention to her daughter. She waved her hand. “Yes, yes. Make sure you take your maids.”

Kate followed Maria back up to their chambers and closed the door once they were inside the sitting room.

“I am terribly sorry about Mama,” her friend said. “It is best to smile and pretend to go along with her. It is what I have been doing these past three years.”

“Are we actually going shopping?”

“Or we could ride in the park—anything to be away from scheming Mother!”

Kate laughed.

“Oh, how thoughtless of me! I love my mama, I truly do,” Maria said, obviously realizing how her words sounded.

“I understand. I have grown accustomed to mine no longer being here. I miss her, of course, but she would not want me to grieve incessantly.”

“Well, mine means well, and it is a good sign that she wants to bring you out and help you find a match, even if it will involve a little discomfort.”

“Discomfort?” Kate questioned.

Maria waved her hand. “Not of the physical sort, I assure you. Come, we should make our escape while we can!”



Chapter Five

The next morning, Jack was summoned to a meeting at the War Office. He dressed in his comfortable uniform and called for his mount to be brought around.

“Good morning, Wethersby. I will be out for a while. Duty calls. I do not suppose there has been any word from my ward?”

“No, sir.”

“If you happen to hear from her, please send word to Everleigh House or the Guards’ Club. I expect to return later in the afternoon.”

“Very good, sir,” Wethersby answered.

Jack took his hat and gloves from the butler before mounting his horse and riding off to his meeting. When he arrived, he was shown into a room with no windows. Lit by several branches of fine wax candles, it contained a dozen leather chairs surrounding a long mahogany table. Lloyd, Knight and Everleigh had already arrived.

“Good morning. Does anyone know what this is about?”

“No,” Knight said with a shake of his head. “We were told to wait here.”

“I had not expected to be working while in England,” Jack mused.

Lloyd stood quietly in the corner with his arms crossed while the others sat down. They chatted about nonsense for perhaps ten minutes. When General Newsom walked in the room, they all shot to their feet and stood at attention.

“At ease, gentlemen. Please resume your seats.” He took the chair at the end of the table and flung packets on the wood before him. Propping his elbows on the table, he then steepled his fingers. “Well, I will come straight to the point. I am aware Lord Wellington sent you here to be awarded and do the pretty, but we have a situation and we will need your expertise.”

“What kind of a situation, sir?” Knight asked.

“We have heard rumors of a plot against Prinny, which is to happen at the victory celebrations.”

"That is not normally our purview," Everleigh pointed out.

"No, but it is a military event. Furthermore, there were also some papers stolen from our office last evening; specifically, some of the plans you brought back from Lord Wellington."

"At least that removes us from suspicion, since all four of us were at the theater last night," Jack said dryly.

"Not to mention the fact you had the papers in your possession during the trip from France," the General retorted. "So, I will need you to perform your duties longer and determine if the two situations are connected and ferret out who the culprit is before our dear Prince Regent's celebration."

"Have we anything to go on at all?" Jack asked.

The general sighed. "Very little, I am afraid. We are not completely certain of when it happened. There was no sign of any breaking in. The last time anyone saw the documents was in the afternoon when I went to put them in the vault at half past five."

"Who was aware of the documents?" Everleigh asked.

The general splayed his hands. "Any number of people and their aides—at least two dozen?"

"We will need to narrow that down, sir."

"I need not tell you this is highly secretive. If word got out that someone within was stealing documents..."

"Do you think this has been perpetrated by an incumbent of the War Office?" Knight frowned.

"I cannot suspect anything else. Someone had to have known of the existence of those documents and where to find them, then have the capability to enter without arousing the suspicion of the guards. It is too coincidental."

"But something a good spy could accomplish, nonetheless," Everleigh pointed out.

"It is a disaster!" the general exclaimed, slamming his hand down on the table. "Do you understand what this means?"

"Yes, sir," they all parroted.

"Good. Now, find the traitor before the victory celebrations, because canceling them is not an option. I want reports every morning by eight of the clock."

"Yes, sir." They stood to attention as he rose and stamped from the room.

The four of them stayed and looked at each other.

"This is no small task. Any ideas?" Jack asked.

"We will have to split up. We do not have much time."

"Someone needs to question the guards here. Are any of you familiar with the building?"

"I am," Lloyd confessed. "My father has had an office here since I was a boy. I will start here."

"I will speak with the general's aide and try to get a list of who knew about the documents," Knight offered.

"It seems to me we should look into the preparations for the celebrations," Everleigh suggested. "Try to see what the threats are and the possibilities."

"That sounds as good a plan as any," Jack agreed.

They went to fetch their mounts. "Do you care to ride through the park?" Jack asked. "I know I should be looking for my ward, but that will be difficult now, with our new task."

"I had hoped to call at Mottram house. Lloyd hurried away before I could ask who Lady Maria's friend was," Everleigh answered.

"I doubt there will be much time for paying calls or searching for the elusive Miss Rafferty," Jack bemoaned. "Where shall we begin?"

"Perhaps we may kill two birds with one stone."

"How do you mean?" Jack asked as they turned their horses toward the park.

"I am not quite certain, but the celebrations are to be held in Hyde Park, and by being there during the fashionable hour, we can do both, no?"

"I suppose so."

"But first, I thought to go and speak with my father. He is bound to have some idea of who would be planning the celebrations." Lord Marsden was a trusted advisor to the Prince.

"Information from one privy to such details is always welcome," Jack agreed as they trotted across the park toward the Everleigh mansion.

Thankfully, Lord Marsden was at home when they arrived. "What can I do for you?" he asked, as if he knew they would not be there on a simple social call.

"We have been tasked to inspect, if you will, the victory celebrations. Could you give me some idea of with whom we should speak?"

Lord Marsden looked at him keenly. "You have been apprised of the threat, then? I suppose it is not surprising it should have reached the War Office."

"Our information was vague at best," Philip said to his father.

"I have heard little more, I am afraid. Mostly mutterings overheard

in taverns in the dark of night. I suspect you do not wish to work in conjunction with the Palace?”

“I would prefer to look into things separately for now, just in case.”

Marsden nodded. “I will make some discreet inquiries, acquire maps—that sort of thing.”

“We would appreciate that,” Jack remarked.

“Have you heard there is to be a reenactment of Trafalgar, on the Serpentine?” the marquess asked.

Philip looked up to the ceiling. “Heaven help us,” he muttered.

“Is this common knowledge, sir?” Jack asked.

“I am not certain,” Marsden answered, frowning.

“Because that seems an excellent time for foul play. Shots, and explosions, you know. Fireworks would be an excellent time to disguise any type of noise.”

“Then we must uncover the plot first,” Philip said, pushing away from the desk he had been leaning against. “Let us go and survey the park.”

“I shall see what information I can gather,” Marsden said with a short salute to them both.

Once they were back outside and mounted, they headed to the parade ground in the center of the park, where the reenactment would be staged.

They dismounted at the bridge and looked about. There were stalls being built, probably where vendors and such were to set up.

“That is an obvious place to put explosives, especially with it being there well in advance,” Jack pointed out.

“We should request it be guarded if that is not already in place, though it seems common sense to me.”

Jack snorted. “Therefore we may presume it will not have been thought of.”

“I imagine all we will get from Father will be the usual dissenters.”

“The Irish and the like?”

“Mm.” Philip murmured agreement while looking around.

“It seems to me a prime place for an assassination. There are any number of trees to hide behind.” The park was in full bloom and the trees were thick with leaves.

“There will have to be a sweep of the park beforehand.”

“And if it is one of our own?”

“Then Prinny had better hope the traitor is a bad shot.”

“I think we would be well served to look over the rosters of who

might be home and those recently discharged.”

“Not a bad idea. Also, anyone with a grievance.”

“Hopefully that list will not be too long,” Jack added.

“Agreed,” Philip said, gazing once more about them. “The crowds appear to be gathering. Shall we take a moment to see if your Venus is available for an introduction? Fodder for dreams, perchance?”

“Very amusing,” Jack murmured. “Why not? A little diversion never hurt anyone.”

“Hookey would approve.”

They rode to the other side of the Serpentine where crowds of ladies and gentlemen, dressed in their finest for the hour of the promenade, were gathered. People immediately took notice of Jack and Everleigh in their uniforms as soldiers were *du jour* at the moment. One benefit of being on a horse meant they could see over the crowd.

It took not a moment for Jack to spot her. Their eyes met and she smiled.

Jack doffed his hat.

That was all the encouragement he needed.



Kate had seen nothing quite like Hyde Park at the fashionable hour. If she were being honest, both she and Maria were disappointed that Lord Philip and his friend had not called earlier in the day. While Maria had felt sure the gentlemen would be at the park, she had assured Kate it would be good entertainment either way.

She had not jested about the latter. Kate had expected people to be walking through the park – and there were many of those – but there was far more than that to feast their eyes upon. They had both dressed in fine walking costumes, with their finest bonnets, and drove in the open barouche. It was such a short distance that Kate was appalled they had not walked. When they arrived, there must have been thousands of people in the park and it was quite clear they were there to be seen and to socialize.

A group of what Maria referred to as dandies minced by on their high heels, wearing brightly colored clothing so tightly fitted that Kate feared for their ability to breathe. Collar points were starched up to the gentlemen’s ears and their hair, she suspected, very likely took more grooming than her own elaborate curls.

“Do not stare, my dear,” the countess gently scolded.

Kate started and found Maria laughing at her. "I am very gauche, am I not?" Kate asked as she joined in.

"I suppose it would be quite a shocking sight for someone not from Town," Maria conceded.

"I will do better to mask my astonishment next time, I assure you."

"I did think Lord Philip would call today, after he sent you that lovely arrangement," the countess remarked. "But I did see Gabriel and he said that they were called into a meeting at the War Office. It seems they must still work whilst they are here."

"I hope it will not be all work." Maria pouted.

"As do I, my dear."

Kate was somewhat pacified that the two soldiers had not deliberately avoided them. The open carriage was soon surrounded by gentlemen, and Kate was quickly overwhelmed with introductions she had no hope of remembering. Truly, there was only one name she wanted to hear and while there were a few uniforms to be seen, there were not enough to give her a great deal of hope that Captain Owens would be among them.

"I was right. Here they come!" Maria squealed. "They look splendid, do they not?"

"Is there a word better than splendid?" Kate leaned over to reply.

Even though Adonis and Cicero came close, there was still a crowd around the ladies' carriage. Kate wished all of them to the devil.

"I wish they would all leave!" Maria quietly echoed her thoughts.

"Would it be rude to climb down and walk away?" Kate teased.

"They would only follow," Maria said through a smile as Sir Julian approached and began reciting poetry. There was a collective groan from the other gentleman.

Lady Mottram decided to intervene. She had also had enough, apparently. "Lord Philip!" She called and waved. "Come at once and give your godmother a kiss!"

Maria struggled to hold back a laugh.

"Am I right in the assumption she is not his godmother?"

Maria shook her head, but the tactic had worked.

The other gentlemen stepped out of the way. Philip and his companion moved their mounts forward and Philip bowed over Lady Mottram's hand with a wink. "I do not think my real godmother would mind."

"Well, something had to be done. Such insufferable manners these young men have these days!"

“And Lady Maria,” he said, taking her hand. “May I say you only improve with age?”

“You may, but I would think a soldier to have better things to do with his time than come up with such flummery!”

Lord Philip’s companion smothered a laugh. Her eyes met his and the twinkle in his eyes indicated he shared her sense of amusement.

“Are you going to introduce us to your friend?” Lady Mottram asked pointedly.

Kate leaned forward to hear, just as Sir Julian made another effort to garner her attention on the other side of the vehicle. Kate wanted to scream.

“Sir, I must beg you to excuse me,” she said tightly. She sensed that the soldier was watching her, but there was little she could do without being unreasonably rude.

“How can I be expected to compete with a man in uniform?” he bemoaned.

Kate was quite sure the uniform would make little difference, but refrained from saying so.

“May I at least beg a dance at the next ball?”

“Of course, Sir Julian.” She would not mention the fact it was likely that she would not be attending balls or be in London for long.

“You do me a great honor!” Begrudgingly, he turned and walked away.

Kate turned back to the soldiers, but they were deep in conversation and she could hardly interrupt. They were discussing something funny that she had missed entirely.

They were all so engrossed in the story that none of them realized she was now free of admirers. When there was a break in the conversation, she gently nudged Maria.

“Oh, I do beg your pardon. May I now introduce you to my dearest friend, Catherine Rafferty? Kate, this is Captain Lord Philip Everleigh and his friend, Captain Jack Owens. They are here with Gabriel to attend the victory celebrations.”

Kate was certain her heart had stopped for a moment, but it was now beating so hard it was difficult to catch her breath. This was her guardian?

The realization appeared to hit them both at the same time. They stared at each other in disbelief.

“What is wrong, Kate?” Maria asked, realizing her friend was shocked by something.

"I think, Lady Maria, that Captain Owens is the very guardian I have been looking for."

"What a happy coincidence, then!" the countess exclaimed.

For some reason, Kate did not feel very happy at all. This person who she had dreamed about last evening was the very person she had thought ill of for the past two years at least, if not longer.

"Well, Jack," Lord Philip said, looking amused, "it seems your search is over."

"Quite," Captain Owens said curtly. Apparently, he was not too happy with the news either.

"I suppose the two of you have much to discuss. Shall we adjourn to Mottram Place or would you rather meet somewhere else?"

Kate did not care where, she just wanted the matter dealt with.

"Whatever the lady wishes." Captain Owens finally spoke more than a word.

"It is a beautiful day, why do we not walk in the park for a while?" Kate responded.

"I will take your horse," Lord Philip offered. Captain Owens inclined his head and dismounted before tossing the reins to Lord Philip. He stood beside the barouche and held out his hand to help Kate down. She was shocked by the contact, and took her hand back as quickly as she could.

If he offered his arm, she did not notice for she immediately began walking, putting her hands behind her back.

It was some time before either of them spoke, by which time they were a fair distance from the fashionable crowds.

"Well, Miss Rafferty, I assume from your reaction you were as surprised to have a guardian as I was to have a ward."

"Yes, indeed, sir."

"The solicitor mentioned that he told you nothing else of the Will's contents."

"He told me he had to inform you first."

"Ah." They walked a few steps further and reached the edge of the Serpentine.

She stopped and looked out over the lake, but did not truly see anything. Captain Owens was difficult to read. She was afraid if she pushed too hard, and too soon, he would not agree to release her.

"I had thought to be free," she said softly. "Will you at least tell me what is the amount of my inheritance?"

She sensed him turn quickly to face her. Bravely, she met his gaze.

"There was no mention of your funds," he said carefully. "I had assumed you to be dependent upon me."

"I hope not," she snapped.

His face broke into a smile and he was so handsome she almost forgot she was irritated with him.

"I believe we should pay a call upon Mr. Wilson. I will send over a message for an appointment tomorrow morning. You are staying at Mottram Place?"

"I am," she confirmed. "I did inform Wethersby." She could feel her guardian's confusion.

"He must have forgotten that detail."

"Oh, dear, I had not realized he was forgetful."

"Or perhaps hard of hearing," Jack added.

They turned and began to walk back to the carriage.

She stopped abruptly and considered him. "May I assume you do not wish to continue this farce? I can be hopeful?"

He hesitated, which filled her with anxiety. She did not understand.

"I think, Miss Rafferty, we should find out all of the circumstances with which Mr. Wilson failed to apprise me. We should see him tomorrow and decide from there."

It sounded reasonable, but she did not feel relieved. She gave a nod as they reached the carriage.

"Is everything arranged to your mutual satisfaction?" the countess asked.

"For the moment," Captain Owens answered. He turned to Kate. "I will call for you in the morning."

"Nonsense! You will dine with us tonight."

Kate bit back a groan. Tomorrow was too soon and now she would have to face him again tonight!



Chapter Six

Jack watched the ladies drive away in the barouche and waited for the teasing to commence. He himself would be ruthless, at any rate, were their situations reversed.

“That was certainly unexpected,” Philip began.

“And that is a gross understatement,” Jack drawled. “England has been naught but a catalogue of delightful surprises since my return,” he added dryly.

“What will you do?”

“In the first instance, wring the solicitor’s neck since my grandmother’s is no longer available.”

Philip inclined his head; he was used to such mutterings from Jack. “Understandable, since an honorable man cannot dream of his ward.”

Jack shot Philip a look full of mock venom. “Since my solicitor ain’t to hand, you will do.”

Philip barked a laugh and urged his horse forward. Together, they rode on to Jack’s newly acquired house. He would have preferred to be alone to muse upon this conundrum, but Philip stayed with him. They stabled their horses and then went into the house, taking up residence in a small wood paneled study where they both sprawled in opposite armchairs.

“We should talk about this,” Philip said.

“We should mind our own business,” Jack retorted.

“Your business is my business. We have a plot to uncover, and if your mind is dwelling on Miss Rafferty, you will miss something.”

He was correct, curse him, but that did not mean Jack was going to admit it out loud.

Rising, Jack went to the door. “Wethersby! Have we anything worth drinking in this house?”

The butler looked at him, clearly startled. “Yes, sir.”

Within minutes, he returned with a tray of cut-glass decanters and a selection of tumblers. With drinks in hand, Jack and Philip settled back

to consider the options. They had done this hundreds of times over the years, but never in Jack's own study.

"I need more information," he finally spoke. "If I can break the guardianship, it solves everything. She indicated it was her wish."

The telltale parallel lines which formed between Philip's brow meant he did not agree. "You would leave that young and beautiful woman prey to the wolves? She needs some kind of protection," he insisted.

"Until two hours ago, I was one of the wolves," Jack pointed out. "At least, I wanted to be."

Philip raised his glass in acknowledgment. "*Touché*. However, now you *do* know, and you are a gentleman... one hopes..." his voice trailed off.

"You are relishing this, are you not?"

"Every single moment," Philip agreed with a crooked smile.

"You will have your day," Jack predicted.

There was a knock on the front door; Jack and Philip looked at each other. "Visitors already?"

After a short pause, Wethersby opened the door and a man was shown in.

"Sheldon?" Philip asked as he stood up. "My father's man of all talents," he explained, turning to Jack.

Sheldon made a quick bow. "Your father sent me to find you, my lord." He held out a leather folio. "I was only to deliver this into your hands."

"As you have done. Thank you, Sheldon." The servant bowed again and made his exit.

"That was quick," Jack muttered.

"Father is nothing if not efficient." He walked over to the desk, opened the folio and began to peruse the contents. Jack got to his feet and followed, looking over his friend's shoulder.

"A map," Philip observed as he spread it out on the wide mahogany surface. "Hyde Park with the plan for the celebration."

"Much as we suspected," Jack observed as he noted the spots for vendors and the bridge, and the perimeter which was marked with soldiers guarding it. "Boats on the Serpentine." Jack snorted.

"Trafalgar," Philip said, by way of explanation. He then looked into the leather pouch and pulled out some more papers and scanned them. "This is a list of those on the committee, from the Palace." He handed it to Jack.

Jack looked through the names but knew none of them. He shrugged

and set it down.

"The next three pages are a list of people who have openly threatened the King or the Prince Regent."

"Is that all?" Jack remarked.

"Indeed. It makes spying on the enemy in wartime seem like child's play."

"What of the people whose business it is to track these folks?"

Philip held up another piece of paper. "We have that list of names as well."

"Delightful."

"Is it not?" Philip agreed. "Although there are marks next to two of the names."

"With less than a fortnight to go, it seems our best course of action would be to watch the park."

"Agreed, but that only works if they are dealing in explosives. If we have a sharpshooter or an assassin with a grenade, then any fellow could succeed."

"That is always the case," Jack argued.

Absently, Philip eased down into the chair behind the desk. For once making no humorous comment, Jack stepped back to sit down again in the armchair he had vacated. He knew his friend well.

There was something going on in that mind of his.

Philip shook his head. "I cannot make a connection."

"Between the missing papers and this?"

"Precisely."

"Nor can I. They may not be related. There are always plots against Prinny. Perhaps it will become more specific as we grow closer to the truth."

"Or perhaps one is a distraction from the other."

"I suppose we must begin by looking into those two names," Jack muttered.

"We must."

"Let me jot a note to the solicitor and then I shall be ready."

That done, Jack attempted to concentrate his thoughts on the matter at hand, though it was devilishly hard. He hoped he had hidden his true thoughts about his ward when her name had been revealed. The solicitor had better have good news on the morrow, he reflected, for there was no telling what his reaction was likely to be otherwise. And what would Miss Rafferty's response be when she heard of his grandmother's codicil that he marry her?

Hopefully, she would never learn of that piece of mischief. He would find a way to manage without her and, Lord willing, she would have enough funds to marry soon and thus no longer be his responsibility.

“A penny for your thoughts,” Philip said as they made their way back down Pall Mall to the gentleman’s clubs—the best sources of gossip amongst gentlemen. It was more than likely they would end up in taverns and public houses before the night was through, but they needed to gather more information about their targets to narrow down the search.

They went first to White’s, where most of the elder scions of the aristocracy tended to spend their free time when not at Parliament. Philip was far more at home in such an establishment, but Jack had enough experience that he could adapt to most any situation, otherwise he would have been dead long ago.

Once inside, Philip was immediately hailed by a portly gentleman with thick white whiskers covering his jowls.

“Oh ho, young Everleigh, how-d’ye-do? Well, now, who is your friend?”

“Lord Jarvis, may I present Captain Jack Owens?”

Jack clicked his heels together and made a bow.

“Come, have a drink with me,” he said, waving them to adjoining armchairs near a roaring fire. It was an extremely warm day and Jack took the chair furthest from the heat of the flames, which earned him a brotherly scowl from Philip. Jack smiled back sweetly.

“What brings you here?” Jarvis asked as the waiter brought glasses of brandy for Jack and Philip. “You young fellows in uniform tend to favor the Guard’s Club.”

“’Tis true,” Philip conceded. “However, when seeking wise counsel, one must look where it may be found.”

The old man nodded with approval. Jack had to admit that Philip was smooth.

Philip leaned forward as though to impart a great secret. “We have been informed that there is a threat to our Prince’s celebrations and as it also concerns us, we are trying to gather information,” Philip said softly.

The older man had leaned forward, obviously straining to hear, but he gave a nod. “I have heard the same.”

“Have you any knowledge of where we might look?”

“I would personally look to the Irish. They are always causing trouble.”

Jack bit his tongue. It always perturbed him when someone

generalized an entire country of people. There were a few known dissenters from that country, but Philip and he had also served alongside others—good, loyal men—in the King’s army.

“That is a great many people to investigate, my lord,” he said. “Do you have any names in particular to offer?”

The baron looked at him in a considering manner before answering. “The obvious answer would be the Catholics, but there is a new upstart by the name of O’Connell, who has been protesting, rather vociferously, in the slums. No one pays him much mind because he merely speaks out about poverty and the rights of the indigent.”

Philip and Jack looked at each other. It was certainly worth investigating.

“The slums, you say?” Philip prompted.

“According to my man, who says the fellow is creating quite a stir in Hammersmith and Camden. He preaches from the street corners and the masses hang on his every word. Smooth-tongued devil. I heard him myself, once. I also heard he was trying to become an MP.”

“Have you any idea where this O’Connell can be found?”

“No, not personally, but I will have my man furnish you with the information he has.”

“Has O’Connell made direct threats?” Jack asked.

“Not as I can say. However, he does not hide his feelings about our Prinny’s spending habits if you catch my meaning.”

“Perfectly.” Philip stood and shook Lord Jarvis’s hand. “If you think of anything else, sir, you know where to find me.”

Jack also inclined his head to the baron. They made their way on through the other parts of the club, but Philip did nothing more than greet people as they passed. When they were outside again, Jack waited for Philip to speak.

“There was no one else worth asking,” Philip explained, already knowing what was on Jack’s mind.

“Where to next? Do you think this O’Connell to be a worthy possibility?”

“Jarvis is one of the most astute men I know despite appearances to the contrary. Often it is those least likely targets that warrant the most attention.”

“But would he have the means to carry off such a threat?”

“That is what we must discover. I do not think one such as he to be the likely filcher of the missing documents, however.”

“That would be too easy,” Jack agreed as they made their way west.

Philip glanced at his pocket watch. "If we do not wish to incur my mother's wrath, we had better return to dress for dinner."

"Then there is no polite way in which I might excuse myself?"

Philip laughed maliciously. "Not a chance. I am going to enjoy every moment of this."

"As ever, I live for your amusement," Jack retorted as they strolled along. Philip merely chuckled and within a few minutes they had reached the steps of the Everleigh mansion.



Normally, Kate would have been pleased with how she looked in the newly refurbished gown. Lavender had always been one of her favorite colors that did not clash with her red hair. However, tonight she was too anxious to take any notice.

"I wish you would not fret so," Maria murmured as Simpson put the finishing touches to Kate's coiffure.

"I do not feel at ease about this," Kate answered.

"You do not know what the solicitor will say."

"It cannot be good news. He told me I still have a guardian and did not indicate that the arrangement was to end in the foreseeable future," Kate argued.

"Be that as it may, you yourself said Captain Owens was none too delighted to have a ward. I am certain something may be decided upon to your mutual satisfaction."

Kate shook her head. "He is the one I am worried about. Something he said, or perhaps the way he said it, made me think he will not be easy to deal with."

"I think he was shocked at the realization you were his ward. I saw the way he looked at you before he *knew*."

Kate dropped her head in her hands and made a sound at the back of her throat.

"Miss!" Simpson scolded.

"Forgive me!" Kate sat up straight again so the maid could finish her toilette.

"It might not be so very dreadful," Maria reassured her.

Kate kept quiet. The feeling of foreboding she felt deep inside never lied, and at this moment, it was almost enough to make her retch.

Simpson completed dressing Kate's hair and clasped a pearl necklace around her neck before she and Maria went downstairs. As they neared

the drawing room, the bad feeling only grew. How was she to endure an entire evening of small talk when her fate loomed over her head like Zeus waiting in a dark cloud, ready to strike?

They entered the drawing room to see the three soldiers standing there together – a striking trio, to be sure. They all looked up and smiled and Kate chastised herself for being melodramatic.

They might be soldiers, but how dangerous could they be to her?

She smiled politely while she was introduced to Lord and Lady Marsden, Captain Everleigh's parents; his elder brother, Lord Venable, and his friend, Mr. Neville Feathers.

"This is your ward?" Lady Marsden asked Captain Owens with open astonishment.

"Indeed, my lady," Captain Owens answered.

"'Tis outrageous!" she exclaimed. "Surely something may be done?" She looked at Kate. "I mean no offense to you, Miss Rafferty, but I am sure you can appreciate the impropriety of such a thing."

"No offense taken, my lady." What else could Kate say?

"If you knew my grandmother, you would understand. She took great pleasure in such perverse tricks," Captain Owen said.

The butler announced dinner and Captain Owens offered Kate his arm. They were lowest in precedence of the illustrious company. Of course, it would be him. She did not wish to touch him, for her feelings were very much conflicted.

But she nevertheless took his arm, telling herself not to be ridiculous.

Once inside the dining room, she was also seated to his left with Lord Philip to her left. For once, she could have wished for a less threatening, elderly gentleman on either side.

Her guardian held her chair for her and waited while she arranged her skirts before helping her to be seated. Glasses were filled and bowls of turtle soup were served by excellent, unobtrusive footmen. Kate had learned how to eat properly, of course, but it had been years since she had attempted polite, almost scripted, conversation.

Thankfully, she was able to speak with Lord Philip first.

"Is this your first time in London, Miss Rafferty?" he asked.

"It is, sir. I lived in India as a child, then attended school in Gloucestershire, and have since been no further than Yorkshire."

"And does London meet your expectations?"

"Oh, yes." She smiled. "I could wish females had the freedoms of gentlemen to go about, but I have still had a delightful time."

He leaned forward and whispered, "Careful, people will think you

are one of Mrs. Wollstonecraft's followers." He gave her a wink and then leaned back.

She laughed. Lord Philip was a flirt. She turned and caught the eye of Maria, who was watching the exchange with a look of astonishment and, perhaps, pain. *Oh, dear.* Kate would have to be very careful. The last thing she would ever do was hurt Maria. She turned to Captain Owens, afraid to further any more misconceptions with Lord Philip, which was a shame because she liked him very much.

"Good evening, Guardian," she said dryly.

"Good evening, Ward," he returned, amusement twinkling in his eyes. "You will be happy to know I have secured an appointment with Mr. Wilson at ten in the morning."

As a footman exchanged their soup bowls for plates and brought round the next course of roasted partridge or potted herring, Kate caught the eye of Mr. Feathers, who seemed also to be watching her but with malice instead of favor. She turned back to her plate.

"Be careful with that one," Captain Owens warned.

"I am careful with everyone," she replied.

"That will make my task easier."

She paused her knife and fork above her partridge. "Let me be clear," she said in a low voice, hoping no one else would overhear. "I have no need of a guardian. I might be required to suffer such protection for a few more months, but you may rest assured you can return to the army and worry no more."

"I am relieved to hear it," he said.

She could not tell from his tone if he was mocking her or not. Most likely he was, she thought ruefully.

She thrust a forkful of partridge into her mouth to refrain from speaking further.

"Mr. Wilson mentioned you had hired a steward. Do you trust him?"

She finished chewing, swallowed, then dabbed at her lips with her napkin before answering. "I trust him as much as I trust anyone. When I left Winterbourne, the estate was running seamlessly. As long as no one changes the systems instituted, all will be well. I knew you were inheriting, and I was aware you were a soldier, so I hired someone who would follow my instructions."

He was watching her carefully. She had that sense about him that there was much more to him beneath his jovial façade than he wanted others to delve. "I thank you for what you have done. I will visit Yorkshire before I return to the Continent."

"You intend to return after inheriting?" she asked, even though they were not familiar enough for her to be so inquisitive. She had a feeling they would become better acquainted than either of them wished.

The expression on his face told her he was probably thinking her very impertinent indeed. He set down his fork and turned fully toward her. "Do you think I should return to Winterbourne and toil in the fields and mend my own fences?"

She frowned. "That was not what I meant, and that would not be necessary, unless you wish to do so."

"Then you, of all people, should understand why I must continue with my career in the army." His quick frown and blink indicated he quickly regretted mentioning that fact and she wondered why.

"What changed your mind?" she asked before she could guard her tongue.

He made a noise that was half scoff, half snort before she saw him clench his jaw. There was a pause, in which he took a long drink of his wine as though contemplating his answer. "The old witch haunts me from the grave, madam," he answered in a menacing tone which reaffirmed Kate's suspicion that he could be dangerous if he wished. Kate looked up to meet his gaze and gave a nod of understanding. She knew very well how mean the old dragon had been. "Even now she prevents me from unencumbering myself from Winterbourne."

"Perhaps the solicitor may help us both. It does not seem right that she could prevent you from selling a property that is not entailed."

"So it would seem, and that would be what the majority of people would have allowed. Dear old Granny took great pleasure in finding ways to create misery and manipulate others. I was quite shocked to hear you managed to restore Winterbourne under her nose."

Kate took no small amount of satisfaction in that. "She was invalided and confined to her bed soon after I arrived. Otherwise, I do not know if it would have been possible."

"Perhaps, then, you at least understand why I stayed away—other than the obvious fact that we have been at war. I had no notion of your existence or..."

"Or nothing, for there was nothing you could have done," she finished for him. "My parents would not have left me in the care of someone such as she, but they could not have known my guardianship would fall to her."

"Or to me, for that matter."

She inclined her head. "Perhaps we are on the same side. I think we

are allies in this situation.”

“Mayhap you are right. Instead of being angry at our situation, perhaps we might help each other.”

“Very well. We may be friends, then?”

His face relaxed and he smiled in a way that sent strange feelings throughout her being.

Oh, dear, that would never do.

She would have to make certain she never gave him cause to smile at her like that again.



Chapter Seven

There was a frown of disapproval in Mr. Wilson's eyes despite the outward smile. "How may I be of assistance?" he asked as they were shown into Wilson's office and took their seats in front of his untidy desk.

"Miss Rafferty has many questions about her inheritance, as do I about certain conditions of the will."

The solicitor tapped one chubby finger on his desk before using it to flip open the file in front of him. "What is it you wish to know? There is little to tell, in truth. I remember the initial deposit made was five-thousand pounds and it has been invested ever since."

It was a very respectable amount, to be sure. Jack looked over at Miss Rafferty, but her face was unreadable. "And which bank holds my investment?" she asked.

He searched further through the file and then held up a receipt.

"Hoares. Here is the receipt made some fifteen years ago."

"Just before we went to India," she said softly.

"I imagine, even it is only in the five percents, it would be near to ten-thousand pounds by now."

"I will believe it when I see it. Do I need that receipt for us to call upon the bank?" she asked.

Mr. Wilson looked at him and Jack gave a nod.

"I shall reach my majority in six months' time, so it will be nice to know what my future holds."

"Speaking of which, I do not suppose there is any hope of ending the guardianship earlier than that date?" Jack queried.

The solicitor frowned his disapproval. "It would take the remainder of the time to have the case heard."

Jack said nothing.

"But with her dowry, she will be quite an eligible prospect on the Marriage Mart," Mr. Wilson remarked. He turned to Miss Rafferty. "You could do worse than consider Captain Owens, your fine guardian – a

war hero, no less.”

Jack all but choked. “That is not necessary.” He nearly growled the words.

The solicitor raised a brow in the manner of the haughtiest duke Jack had ever met. “You did not tell her,” he said accusingly.

Angrily, Jack pushed back his chair and stood up. “What I do or do not tell her is entirely my business. Is there anything else Miss Rafferty needs to know about the will or her inheritance?”

“No. The only other part which concerns her also concerns you.” He cleared his throat pointedly.

“Very well. I will bid you good day.” He held out a hand to assist Miss Rafferty from her chair, noting her slight hesitation before she accepted.

After one step, she paused and turned back to face the solicitor. She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again and allowed Jack to escort her from the establishment. He hailed a nearby hack and they were seated before she spoke again.

“I infer there is a part of the will which concerns me that you do not feel it necessary for me to know?”

Jack cleared his throat, thinking how best to answer. “It concerns you only in a peripheral sense.”

“Yet concerns me nonetheless,” she replied sharply.

“As I have no intention of acting upon it, I did not feel it incumbent upon me to tell you.”

“Since you have no intention of acting upon whatever it may be, then what is the harm in telling me?” she countered again, and Jack found himself rather enjoying the exchange.

“Miss Rafferty, we have six months in which we must deal together, whether we like it or not. Were I to tell you, it would greatly affect those dealings.”

She made a sound resembling a huff of impatience. “As far as I am concerned, there need not be a great deal of dealing at all!”

“Perhaps not, but I very much doubt, at least for the remainder of my time here, that we will not be seeing each other. You are staying with Lord and Lady Mottram, and thus we will be moving in the same circles.”

“You are insufferable, Captain Owens.”

“Oh, I hear that quite often from my commander,” he agreed, determined to be agreeable. Besides, she was quite beautiful when irritated. The blue of her eyes was deeper and her cheeks took on an

enchanting glow.

"Really? That was not a compliment!"

"Perhaps it was not intended as such, but it was accepted thus."

She folded her arms over her chest and turned to him. "Would you yourself not be burning with curiosity if our positions were reversed?"

"Very much so."

"Then why will you not tell me?"

She was clearly quite annoyed, and Jack wondered how far he could push her.

He pretended to consider the matter and even went so far as to tap each of his fingers on his knee in a rotating pattern. They were drawing near to Mottram Place and he knew he could not simply tell her and deposit her at the door, nor did he wish to further this conversation in the house with other ears about.

"I think we should take a turn about the park."

"If that will loosen your tongue, then by all means!"

Jack ordered the driver to go on to the park and dismissed him at the corner gate.

Having paid the man, he helped Miss Rafferty to alight and they walked away from the bridle-path toward the lake.

"Well, sir?" she prompted.

"As you know, my grandmother was a mean old hag. When Mr. Wilson told me of the codicil, I did not take it seriously."

"Do you ever take anything seriously?" she asked.

"A clever hit, my dear," he acknowledged. "Only when needs must."

"Well," she said, reflectively nibbling the finger of her glove, "if it had to do with me, then I cannot fathom what it could be. She did not like me, other than as her servant."

"Perhaps, then, that is exactly why she did it," he contemplated. "She did not have a particular liking for me, either."

Miss Rafferty stopped. "Out with it," she commanded, in the manner of the finest general.

Jack laughed.

She rapped him on the arm with her reticule. "How have you lived so long?"

"Another question my ears are accustomed to." He led her to a bench and they sat down. "The old dragon will not allow me to inherit Winterbourne fully for five years..." He paused and she gasped. "Unless I marry you."

It was as if the entire park paused. There were no children's screams

or quacks from the ducks bobbing on the lake while he waited for her response.

“But that is horrible!”

“Why, thank you,” he retorted, deliberately misinterpreting.

“That is not what I meant, as you well know. I do not see how that is legal.”

“Mr. Wilson assures me that it is.” Jack stood up and began to pace back and forth, but Miss Rafferty joined him and they began to walk further.

“It is all ridiculous, which is why I did not tell you. Even now I see things have changed between us. You will suspect my motives every time I am kind to you, and if I am seen flirting with you, which is my natural mien, then I will be judged as a lecherous and dishonorable guardian.”

“Who gives a fig for that!” She threw up her hands.

He looked at her with surprise.

“I collect you have no intention of marrying and you wish to return to the army? Did you not say you had intended to sell Winterbourne and be on your way?”

“As to the first, that is correct. As to the second, I had no notion of Granny’s death until I returned to England, but it had been my plan when the inevitable occurred. She refused to take care of the place or allow me to, and so, in short, yes.”

In silence, she walked some distance to where the parade ground lay.

Jack was waiting for her to say something when he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. “Take my arm,” he said, immediately reverting to commanding soldier.

Surprisingly, she obeyed and he led her toward the movement. He could not have said what caused him to react or be suspicious, other than years of being a spy and a healthy instinct for survival.

When they drew closer, he stopped and positioned her so he could get a closer look at where a small group of men were engaged in what appeared to be a heated discussion. He was grateful he had chosen civilian dress for the occasion, and hoped the two of them merely seemed to be companions out for a walk in the park.

“Is something wrong with those gentlemen?” she asked.

He did not take his eyes from them, discreetly trying to memorize as much as he could about each of the men, but one had his back to them and he could not will him to turn around.

“Perhaps,” he answered absently, concentrating on the group. One of

the gentlemen pointed toward the stage while the one with his back to Jack shook his head.

Another of the men looked up and Jack quickly turned toward Miss Rafferty, angling his head so he might not be recognized. By the grace of God, she made no demur even though he was too close now to be a mere companion.

“Did he look away?”

“Yes, but they are also moving further from us.”

Jack held back a curse. Had she not been with him, he would have followed, but he was quite certain he would recognize those three men again.

“Shall we follow?” she asked.

“No, it is too dangerous.”

“Are you a spy, my dear guardian?”

“What if I tell you that I am?” he countered, turning to look her directly in the eye.

“I can see no other reason why four perfectly ordinary-looking gentlemen having a conversation in the park would pique your interest,” she replied, her voice laced with sarcasm.

“It is a reasonable assumption,” he said, leading her back toward the gate into the park.

“You are not going to tell me, are you?”

“My lips are sealed,” he agreed, in a jovial tone he was certain would annoy her.

Neither said another word the rest of the way to Mottram Place, although he could tell she was champing at the bit.

He smiled and bowed over her hand in farewell, hoping to leave on that.

“Do not think we are finished, Captain Owens.”

“Oh, the thought never crossed my mind.”



If at Winterbourne, Kate would have taken the time to walk about the estate in order to think, but she had no such luxury in London or at Maria's home. Knowing she would have many questions to answer as soon as she was inside, Kate prayed that Lady Mottram was not about. She did not feel like pretending to be happy at the moment.

Thankfully, she was able to escape up to her chambers, but Maria was in the sitting room.

“Kate! I have been waiting for you! Tell me everything,” she said as she set aside the book she was reading and rubbed her hands together.

Kate sat on the sofa opposite Maria’s perch in the window seat and sighed heavily.

“Well, what did he say?” she asked impatiently.

“Do you care for the good news first or the bad news?”

Maria looked perplexed. “The good news, I suppose. Is it your dowry?”

“Indeed. The solicitor thinks it should be worth close to ten-thousand pounds at least. I have the receipt of initial deposit and the name of the bank whereby to make inquiries.”

“If they will speak with you,” Maria teased. “You should probably ask your guardian to do so on your behalf.”

The thought of having to ask him to do anything for her chafed, but very likely Maria was correct. It would be much simpler than trying to deal with the matter herself. Although, she thought derisively, they would probably only ask him for permission to speak to her.

“I am very pleased for you. That is the amount of my dowry and should help you make a very good match.”

“I daresay,” Kate remarked absently. “I had not thought to come to London and make a marriage.”

“Mama will be so pleased, but I warn you, it might only make her more determined.”

“Then perhaps we should not tell her?” Kate suggested.

Maria shook her head. “She will find out one way or the other. Now, what of the bad news?”

Kate shook her head. “It is so fantastical you may not believe it.”

“Go on,” Maria said, excitement glowing in her eyes.

“First of all, I am quite certain Captain Owens did not wish for me to know. The solicitor quite overstepped his bounds by remarking upon it.”

“Tell me what it is!” Maria cried.

“I have told you how cruel Mrs. Owens was?”

“Yes.”

“Well, it seems she added a codicil to her will that Captain Owens not be permitted to sell the estate for five years unless he marries...*me*.”

“What?” Maria sat forward, disbelief written upon her face.

“I know. I had almost to drag the information from him.”

Maria’s eyes narrowed as she sat back in her seat. “Why not?” she finally asked.

Kate frowned. “I do not follow you. What do you mean, why not?”

“Why not marry him?”

“You cannot be serious!” Kate exclaimed.

“I am perfectly serious. You cannot tell me you were not considering him both eligible and handsome the other evening.”

“I did not know who he was!” Kate argued. “He is my guardian, for goodness’ sake!”

“He did not know who you were, either, and I would wager there was no little attraction felt on his part.”

“Perhaps, but he admitted he was an incorrigible flirt, just like your Lord Philip.”

“He is not my Lord Philip,” Maria retorted, sadness throbbing in her voice.

“But you would like him to be. Is there no hope there?” Kate asked gently.

Maria sent her a scathing look. “Do be serious!”

“I am. It is clear he holds you in high regard. I do not see why that is any more unlikely than myself with Captain Owens,” she reasoned.

Maria shook her head. “Lord Philip could have anyone he wished. Why would he choose me?”

“Why would he not?”

“Let us speak no more about it, I beg of you!” She threw up her hands in exasperation.

“Very well, as long as we do not speak of my guardian as a potential husband.”

“But do you not see that possibility is far more likely? It would also be a very good match!”

“It is hard for me to see anything at all. I need more time to reflect upon recent events.”

“Well, I hope you can reflect whilst at a garden party. Mama is insisting we go to Lord and Lady Worth’s river estate in Richmond.”

“I would very much prefer to stay here and indulge in a period of quiet contemplation.”

“You know my mother will never allow it. Besides, it will be much more fun than most of the Season’s entertainments.”

Kate sighed. “Very well. I do not much care to contemplate my future at the moment.”

“I think you should enjoy yourself and forget about the rest. You know you have an inheritance now, so that is one burden lifted.”

“I suppose so.” Kate rose and walked over to the window, where she stood looking at the clouds. “I am not so certain we will be in the

garden long.”

Maria joined her in looking at the darkening sky. “Drat. My hair never holds a curl if it rains. I will go and ask Mama if she still wishes to go.”

Maria left to discover Lady Mottram’s verdict on the proposed outing. Meanwhile, Kate continued to look outside, pondering her situation. Did she wish to remain in London and find a husband? There was a great sense of relief in knowing she had some money on which to live and that she would not be desperate or destitute when she left Mottram Place. She could even look forward to setting up her own cottage somewhere. Yet was that what she truly wished for? She had not allowed herself to dream of marriage –of children.

An only child, she had longed for siblings, but when her parents had died, she had locked away notions of motherhood since she had been confined to Winterbourne.

But...marriage to Captain Owens?

She had to admit she had taken an immediate fancy to him, and perhaps he was not the scoundrel she had thought him at first, but he seemed determined to return to the army—and he was her guardian.

Following the drum did not sound as though it would be pleasant, but she really knew very little about it. And now she was becoming fanciful to be even considering such a thing!

She shook her head, and looking out over the street, she saw a gentleman walking through the courtyard in the middle of the square. There was something about him that triggered a memory, but she could not quite grasp it.

He was probably just someone she had seen in passing. After all, London was a large city. She continued to watch, trying to form some logical explanation. It would certainly come to her later. A few large drops of rain hit the window pane and the gentleman stopped to unfurl his umbrella, but then he looked toward the house, almost directly up at her. She jumped back. Although she recognized Mr. Feathers, the gentleman from dinner the night before, she did not wish to be caught staring. Why was it such a relief finally to put her finger on something she could not recall?

Nonetheless, the feeling lingered. Lifting her chin, she shrugged. The rain was coming down harder now and Mr. Feathers was walking away from the house. Wrong as it may be, she hoped the rain continued. An afternoon at home sounded rather nice.

Maria returned, looking put out.

“What is it?” Kate asked.

“Mama says we shall not go. There was a plan in place for rain and they will have a party this evening instead.” She slumped into the chair, looking dejected.

“Cheer up. You can read.”

“Really, Kate. I do not read when in Town. There are months and months in the country in which to read!”

“I suppose so,” Kate remarked in a tone indicating she did not agree with her.

“What, then, would you like to do?”

“We could go shopping. Now that you know you will not be poor, we could buy some new dresses. There is an amazing store in Cheapside to tickle even the frugal heart.”

“As long as we may go to a book shop. There is a new novel I wish to purchase.”

Maria cast her a look of exasperation and Kate smiled impudently in return.

“Shall we go, then? I have already asked for the carriage to be brought around.”

They set out for the fashionable quarter, and Maria even allowed Kate to purchase the new novel from Hatchards first. The rain eased as they reached Cheapside, and having been set down with their umbrellas, Maria gave instructions to the driver to return for them in two hours.

“It appears everyone who was to have gone to the garden party is here instead,” Maria remarked with amusement as there appeared to be a line of fine carriages waiting to deposit their passengers before Smythe’s Silk Emporium, which was next to East India House.

Inside was the largest store Kate had ever seen, with several rooms divided by archways. Each room held more fabrics than a large ship could hold, and the walls were covered with rainbows of color in various designs. The smell of the fabric and unique incense made her think of her childhood in India and the vibrant markets full of vendors.

“Oh, look, there is Mr. Feathers.” Maria waved at her brother’s friend. “I suppose I should not at all be surprised to see him here.”

Kate looked across; Mr. Feathers turned around to acknowledge them. Suddenly, she recalled where she had seen him before. He had been one of the four men Captain Owens had watched so keenly in the park.



Chapter Eight

Jack and Philip spent the rest of the day searching for Mr. O'Connell. Jack had not anticipated spending his time in London amongst the Irish slums, but here they were. Their inquiries had led them to Camden Town, where Mr. O'Connell was frequently to be found, preaching to the Catholic crowds and trying to gain their support for a seat in Parliament.

"Here is Saint Michael's," Philip said as they tied their horses to a nearby post and promised an urchin a shilling apiece to watch them.

The door to the church was open to the warm summer day, although the air was thick with threatening rain. The pews were empty, and the inside glowed with candlelight. Their boots echoed as they walked through the nave, but there was no one to be seen.

"Shall we try the presbytery?"

"That sounds reasonable to me," Jack agreed.

They went out of the side door to where a small courtyard joined the house with the church. A fragrant garden in full bloom greeted them – clearly a labor of love for someone there.

Jack stepped forward and knocked on the wooden door.

A grey-haired man in spectacles and a cassock opened the door. "What may I do for you gentlemen?" he asked in a thick Irish brogue.

Purposely dressed in civilian clothing so as not to be threatening, Philip held out his hand. "Good afternoon, Father. We are looking for a man by the name of Daniel O'Connor."

"Aye, I know Daniel. Everyone around here does. Has something happened? Why do you not come in for a cup of coffee and be telling me about it?"

The priest signalled to his housekeeper and led them into a study. They had to wait until they were seated around a low table and had been served with coffee before they were able to continue.

"You would not be here if something had not happened. I will be telling you what I know about Daniel O'Connell and then you may ask your questions, but if as it's a peck of trouble you think he's involved

with, then Daniel is not your man.”

Jack and Philip cast skeptical glances at each other over their cups.

“’Tis true, Daniel does speak out about the evils of idleness and riches, but he is a very peaceful man. He means to make changes the right way—through Parliament rather than through violence.”

“There have been threats made toward the Prince Regent, so you will understand why we must investigate. The Irish are not known for promoting peace.”

“No,” he agreed. “’Tis unfortunate, since most of my people are willing to work hard and do their duty, but there are radical groups that be violent enough to make up for the rest. If as you had seen the poverty and famine there, you would understand it better, even if you did not agree with it.”

Jack gave a nod. He had been to Ireland and knew the priest spoke the truth. “If not O’Connell, do you have any names you can give us?”

The father gave him a look. “You know I cannot do that, lad.”

“I meant information not protected by the confessional,” Jack clarified.

“I do not have any specific names for you. You might, however, be looking over in Hammersmith, for that is where the other large Irish community may be found—if that is what you seek.”

It was in line with what they had already discovered, but O’Connell was the only specific name they had come across.

“Will you give us an idea of what O’Connell looks like?”

“Dark red hair, blue eyes and fair of face. Indeed, it is a handsome fellow he is.”

“Where might we find O’Connell, so we might reassure ourselves?” Philip asked.

“He divides his time between the two villages and is oft to be found in the squares, speaking to the crowds that gather to hear him. I have not seen him about for two or three days, though.”

Almost as one, Philip and Jack drained their cups and set them on the table before standing.

“Thank you for your time, Father. We are only trying to prevent trouble.”

“I understand, and I agree with you. May God be with you and smile on your endeavours, my sons. Violence is rarely the answer to the changes we seek.”

Having left the church, Jack and Philip walked through the square, looking for any crowds.

"If only I could see his face, I would be reassured."

"I saw a group of four men in the park this morning, and my instinct tells me they are involved."

"You saw their faces?"

"All but one. He had his back to me the entire time."

"Did they see you?"

"Perhaps, but since I was with Miss Rafferty, I do not think their suspicion would be high."

Philip gave a nod. "That is good news, at all events. Perhaps we should sketch them?"

"I have little talent for such things."

"Neither do I, but I know someone who does." Philip looked up at the sky as the promised rain began to fall. "I do not believe we will now be attending the garden party my mother informed me of this morning."

"Thank God for that," Jack murmured. "Who is this person who can sketch?"

"Why, Lady Maria, and it so happens your ward is staying with her."

"Oh, yes, my ward," he retorted sardonically.

Paying off the steadfast urchin, they remounted and made their way to Mottram Place, hoping to seek Lady Maria's assistance.

"How do you propose we do this without explaining ourselves?"

"Unfortunately, my ward already has her suspicions."

Philip stopped for a cart to pass and looked at him, incredulity alive in his lifted brows and gaping mouth.

Jack held up his hands. "I neither confirmed nor denied, but she was with me in the park when I noticed the four men. I believe she understands the need for caution."

They started moving again.

"I presume, since her brother is in the army, Lady Maria will understand the importance of helping us, as well as discretion."

However, when they arrived at Mottram Place, they were informed that Miss Rafferty and Lady Maria had gone shopping.

"When do you expect them to return, Hendricks?"

"Lady Maria did not see fit to furnish me with that information, my lord, but they have been gone for over two hours now," Hendricks returned.

"May we wait?" Philip asked.

"Of course. Would you care for some refreshment?"

"That would be very welcome, thank you," Philip answered.

Hendricks showed them into the drawing room and shortly

afterwards returned with a tray of sandwiches and a pot of tea.

"You do realize that ladies who are out shopping could be several more hours?" Jack asked.

"Of course, but I do not care to go from door to door through the slums in the rain. If your suspicions were aroused, I consider this is a more useful way to spend my time."

"It could have been nothing," Jack reminded him.

Philip only shrugged.

Half an hour later, they heard a carriage stop outside the house and soon the voices of the two ladies, chatting and laughing, filled the entrance hall. It took only a couple of minutes for Hendricks to show them into the drawing room. Both Jack and Philip stood up at their entrance.

"Lord Philip, Captain Owens, what a pleasant surprise. May I enquire what brings you here?" Lady Maria asked as they stepped inside.

"We were hoping you could perform a small service for us," Philip answered.

"Of course. What do you wish us to do?"

"I was hoping that you would consent to sketch some faces for Captain Owens."

"It would be my pleasure. Do you require anyone in particular?" Maria asked.

"There is the rub. We do not know who they are, but I have seen them," Jack explained.

"The gentlemen in the park?" Miss Rafferty queried at once.

"Indeed," Jack answered. "Although I need to warn you this is information not to be shared with anyone."

"Of course," Miss Rafferty replied quickly.

"I collect you wish for me to sketch faces which you describe to me? I am not certain I am equal to the task," Maria responded doubtfully.

"Would you be so kind as to make the attempt? I have heard of artists doing this for the authorities and so enabling criminals to be caught."

Lady Maria pursed her lips. "It would be a challenge, to be sure, but I will try if you think it will help."

She left to gather her drawing-book and pencil while Hendricks brought fresh tea and sandwiches. The rest of them sat down and Miss Rafferty poured the steaming brew.

"Those four men who we saw this morning..." Miss Rafferty began.

"Yes?"

"I saw the fourth man this afternoon. The one whose face you did not see."

"How can you be sure?" Jack asked, leaning forward in his chair.

"What do you remember about him?"

Jack narrowed his gaze and thoughts. "A black beaver hat and dark brown hair that reached the top of his collar; a greatcoat with several capes, pin-striped pantaloons and black boots with a white band around the top."

"Precisely, except he also carried a walking stick with a snake head. I am certain that is who I saw. I first saw him in the square earlier, when it began to rain—from our sitting room window—and then Lady Maria and I saw him again whilst we were shopping."

"And who is this paragon?" Philip asked.

"Why, it was Mr. Feathers, Lord Venable's friend from dinner."

Jack and Philip exchanged glances.

"I have known him all my life," Philip said, clearly unconvinced.

"Perhaps it was nothing, but he bears watching."

Maria returned to the room and sat down next to Jack.

"You may not laugh if my efforts are atrocious," she said with good humor.

"I will not laugh," Jack reassured her. "I cannot draw a credible stick."

"Very well. Let us begin with the first subject. Start with his nose."

Jack closed his eyes, yet while he could see the three men, describing them was another story. Slowly, he described what he could.

When he opened his eyes to see her efforts, she had done a praiseworthy job.

"What is it?"

"You have done exactly as I said, but something is not quite right. I believe his nose was larger and his eyes were farther apart."

"Forgive me, Captain. With practice, I might be able to do a fair likeness."

"I think that will do. Should we try the others in case someone might recognize them?"

"Of course, if you think it will help."

Jack described the other two men. He was not sure anyone would be able to use the images to help Philip and himself in their investigation, but they had not wasted their time that afternoon. Knowing Mr. Feathers was one of the men certainly gave them something with which to start looking.



The rain continued for the next two days, curtailing their usual outings to the park. Kate spent most of her time devouring her new book, and Maria wrote letters to her friends and family in the country.

This afternoon, however, Kate caught Maria looking out of the window, a frown on her face.

"What is it?" Kate asked her friend.

Maria did not look away from the object of her interest, so Kate joined her by the window.

"Mr. Feathers."

"Do you know, I have seen him walking this way every single day?"

"I expect he must live nearby and be walking toward the park," Kate said reasonably. "I have also seen him walking past."

"He does not live nearby," Maria remarked. "He has rooms at the Albany, which is near Saint James'."

"Perhaps there is a logical explanation, such as a friend he is visiting."

It was raining as Mr. Feathers approached, but his umbrella was not up.

"Just wait a moment," Maria said. As soon as he was in front of Mottram Place, the gentleman unfurled his umbrella.

"He did that the last time I was watching, but it had just begun to rain so I thought it was a normal happenstance," Kate responded.

"But it has been raining nonstop for two days. Why would he particularly wait until he was in front of my house to open it?"

"That is peculiar." Kate wished to inform Captain Owens of this immediately.

It had to mean something, but what?

And if it were some sort of signal, who was he communicating with? Major Lloyd?

How could she get word of this to her guardian?

"How very odd," Maria remarked. "Do you think we should investigate? Could it have anything to do with those matters Lord Philip and Captain Owens are concerned about?"

"What could we do?" Kate questioned, feeling dubious.

"Well, we could see who is at home. If Gabriel is here, then perhaps Mr. Feathers is signaling to him."

"I suppose so." Kate was hesitant to commit herself. Did Maria not realize what that could mean? "Or perhaps there could be someone else

he is communicating with, in another house in the square—or it could be entirely a coincidence.”

“Look at his attire.” Maria cast her a look. “Do you think he would allow a drop of rain to hit his head without purpose?”

“Probably not.” Kate sighed. “Mr. Feathers is living up to his name as a peacock.”

“Let us go down and see who is here. If he is signaling to Gabriel, then at least we shall have an avenue to explore.”

Kate hoped not, but she still intended to tell her guardian and Lord Philip.

Having almost skipped down the wide staircase, Maria stopped outside the study door. “What pretense should we use to intrude? I never go in there.”

“I need a pen and paper?” Kate suggested.

Maria shrugged and knocked. “That is as good as any, although my brother might wonder why there is none in Mama’s writing-desk.”

“Enter,” a deep voice answered. Following in Maria’s wake, Kate saw that Major Lloyd looked as though he were preparing to go out.

Maria went inside. “Oh, Gabriel. I ran out of paper. I came to see if there was any here.”

He did not blink an eye. He opened the drawer to the desk and pulled out two sheets of paper and handed them to Maria.

“Splendid. Thank you.”

Gabriel inclined his head to Kate, but his gaze was cold. Something about him did not sit quite right with her.

“Will you be at the Everleigh ball tonight?” Maria asked.

“Yes, unless I can find a way out of it,” he agreed.

“The expected response,” Maria muttered. “Do save a dance for us,” she said more loudly before they left the room.

They climbed the stairs back to their chambers and entered the sitting room.

Kate held out her hand. “May I use one of those?”

“Of course,” Maria answered absently. “I am inclined to think Feathers was signaling to Gabriel,” she said as she began to pace about the room. Kate sat down at the escritoire and began to write to Captain Owens.

My dear guardian,

Please forgive my informality but I have some news which may be of note.

Maria and I noticed something of interest today, and for several previous days. Mr. Feathers has been walking through the square every day and unfurling his umbrella when he passes the house, whether it is raining or not. Major Lloyd was at home today, at the time of this curious incident, and looked about to leave when we made an excuse to visit his study. I cannot tell if it means anything, but it is a very odd thing to do if it means nothing, and I thought you would wish to know. Perhaps Maria and I should have followed, but it was raining rather hard.

I shall look forward seeing you tonight, at the Everleigh ball.

*Ever your obedient ward,
Kate*

“Who are you writing to?” Maria finally stopped her perambulations long enough to notice Kate’s occupation.

“Captain Owens. I do hope it is not overly inappropriate to write to my guardian.”

Maria twisted her lips in thought. “I think a case could be made for it, but will you not see him tonight?”

“Possibly...even probably. We did not discuss his social calendar, but I am not certain this is something I wish to say in front of other people,” Kate said as she folded up the paper and sealed it with a wafer.

“Do you think they could be spies and are passing secrets to each other?”

Kate was startled, yet was that not the same conclusion she had come to, although Captain Owens had neither confirmed nor denied her mischievous enquiry?

“I think, perhaps, you are an avid novel reader, Maria.”

“Of course, I am; just not in Town. Do you think I am allowing my imagination to run too far?”

Kate did not know how to answer, but she could trust Maria. “If you are, then I am thinking the same thing. I thought to send our observations to Captain Owens, in this note.”

“Do you think he is a spy?”

“I have no idea, but he did mention that he and Lord Philip are investigating a threat to the Prince Regent’s celebrations.”

“Oh, goodness!” Maria said excitedly.

“Maria,” Kate scolded, “if indeed they are spies, this is a very serious matter.”

“I know, I know. It is just nothing exciting ever happens to me. To

think we might have helped in an investigation!"

"But Maria, if Mr. Feathers was signaling to your brother, then he could be involved in something foul."

"He could just as easily be working to find the criminals," she countered.

"That is true. We must hope that is the case, if indeed there is anything nefarious going on at all."

"We should have that letter delivered."

They made their way back downstairs and found Hendricks tidying the study. "Has my brother gone out, Hendricks?"

"Yes, Lady Maria," he answered. "Not long after you spoke to him, I believe."

Maria nodded and held out the letter. "Could you please see this delivered to Captain Owens on Half Moon Street, immediately?"

"Of course, my lady," he said, accepting the letter and leaving the study.

Maria followed behind and closed the door. She leaned up against it with a mischievous look on her face.

"What are you contemplating?" Kate asked, with a deep sense of foreboding.

"Well, Gabriel is gone out. My father is out. Perhaps we should search in here for clues."

"If your brother is involved, do you think he would leave clues lying about?"

"We shall never know unless we look, will we? I would not have taken you for lily-livered, Kate."

"I will stand watch while you search. It is not my family and I am a guest here, I might remind you."

"That may be so but I am a daughter of the house and I give you permission."

Maria was already searching through the desk drawers and quickly found a secret panel. Kate was impressed despite herself.

"Unfortunately, it contains nothing but bills and correspondence with Arden Park," she said as she put everything back where she had found it.

"I would consider that good news," Kate remarked.

"Except we might have been able to clear Gabriel. Finding nothing means we know no more than we did before."

"I suppose that is one way of viewing it."

"Let us search his rooms. We should have enough time."

Kate followed Maria as she climbed the stairs. There was no point in trying to talk sense into her friend, but there was reason in what she said. Perhaps they could remove Major Lloyd from suspicion if they found some information. Surely, he was on the same side as Captain Owens and Captain Everleigh? Surely, whatever he was doing was in order to find the people threatening the Prince? Releasing a heavy breath, Kate hoped Captain Owens would be able to reassure them.

“Stand at the door and warn me if you hear anyone coming. The maids have finished until later in the day, so it should be quiet.”

Kate agreed as she watched Maria again thoroughly investigate the contents of her brother’s room. Methodically, she searched his dressing room, his wardrobe, and a trunk.

“Should I be disturbed by how efficient you are at this?” Kate asked.

“The benefit of having siblings, my dear,” Maria returned, not pausing in her search. She was now on her hands and knees, looking beneath the bed.

“Is this, then, a normal occurrence?”

“As children, it was. I will admit I have not done this in years. One last hope,” Maria replied as she pulled back the carpet and lifted a panel from the floor.

A hidey-hole in the floorboards seemed somewhat juvenile to Kate, but she held her tongue. “Is there anything?”

“Not a thing,” Maria said with evident disappointment. “Not one single thing.”



Chapter Nine

Jack and Philip had just returned to Everleigh House from seeking out Mr. O'Connell—to no avail—when a messenger, garbed in the Mottram livery, delivered a letter.

"I do not recognize the handwriting," Philip said, looking over his shoulder.

"What the devil?" Jack asked as he broke the seal and saw the signature.

They proceeded to read the words together then looked up at each other. Philip was clearly as perplexed as Jack was.

"Have you ever heard suspicion of Lloyd?"

Philip shook his head. "Never. He is a hard one to read, to be sure, but Wellington trusts him implicitly."

"Do you think he could be acting as a go-between or double agent?"

Philip sat down in the chair near the fire. "Perhaps, but I do not wish to contemplate such a thing."

"Nor do I. Should we simply confront him? It could have an innocent explanation."

"While I appreciate you are giving him the benefit of the doubt, you know we can never be too careful and it is likely the papers were stolen by someone within the War Office."

"Let us keep this between ourselves for now. We must tell Miss Rafferty to say nothing," Philip warned.

"And find out if she has spoken to anyone else about it," Jack added.

Philip hit the desk in frustration. "Our families are very close. It would be devastating."

"Hopefully, it is nothing. All of it could be innocent—a simple coincidence." Jack held out his hands.

"It is funny how we play devil's advocate for one another."

"It keeps us in line," Jack agreed.

"What do you propose we do next?"

"I think, for now, we need to dress for your mother's ball. I think we

should watch Lloyd and Feathers closely tonight and then, tomorrow, begin looking for the other three men.”

“I have shown the drawings to my father’s man. He can be trusted and, most likely, he will find them before we have any hope of so doing.”

Jack nodded. “At least our time at the ball will not be wasted.”

“Do not let my mother hear you say that!” Philip teased.

“You know as well as I that I have no business in looking for a wife.”

“Perhaps not, but you may certainly dance with all of the young and desperate females who will be there tonight.”

“Ah, that is the way of things, is it? Well, then, if that is her expectation, I am at her service.”

Jack left Philip to return his lodgings and dress for the ball, thinking as he walked. Were they hunting down the wrong rabbit hole? He and Philip had been spying and reconnoitering for many years—as had Major Lloyd—and one had to follow one’s instincts but not dismiss other paths of enquiry. Thus far, they had no other path to follow and London was a much larger world in which to try to narrow down the field. In war, the suspects tended to be more obvious—though not always.

He dressed in his regimentals and returned to Everleigh House for dinner.

Most of the guests had already gathered in the drawing room; as he surveyed the assembled, his eyes immediately found his ward’s. She was, in a word, glorious. Her gown of medium blue somehow made her eyes look fathomless, even from where he stood, and provided the perfect counterpoint to draw the fire from her hair, which glistened in the candlelight.

He shook himself out of his musings. It really would not do for him to be salivating after his ward. He went forward to greet her, nonetheless, and bowed when he reached her and Lady Maria.

“Ladies, may I say, you will put all others in the shade this evening?”

“Oh, indeed you may, sir.” Lady Maria smiled as she held out her hand to him.

“Have you any dances left for me to claim?” he asked smoothly.

“The first waltz is mine,” Philip’s voice interjected from behind him.

Jack pretended to sigh heavily in dejection. “Then I shall have to settle for the second.” He turned to Miss Rafferty. “Is your first waltz available?” He leaned forward and whispered loudly, “’Tis the only dance I have any talent for.”

“I do hear it is one of Lord Wellington’s requirements for his

officers.” Maria laughed.

“Indeed, it is,” another voice boomed from behind him. Jack turned to see his commander standing there, putting them all in the shade in his own regimentals.

“Good evening, ladies. Everleigh. Owens.” He nodded to Philip and Jack.

“Sir! I was unaware you would be joining us,” Philip said, greeting the duke with a smile.

“You did not think I would miss the celebrations, did you?”

Jack and Philip exchanged glances. Had he not said that very thing?

“I believe I will take those waltzes remaining, if you will be so kind as to introduce me to this new young lady.” Wellington bowed gracefully. “Lady Maria and I are old friends.” He took her hand and bowed over it.

“Sir, may I introduce Miss Rafferty, my ward?”

The duke also bowed before her but as he straightened, he cast a look at Jack. “I have a feeling the three of us should speak. Apparently, a great deal has happened since you left me. Will you excuse us, ladies, while I have a quick word with my men?”

“Of course, Your Grace.” Both ladies curtsied to Wellington before walking across the room to greet some other guests.

He moved closer and spoke quietly. “What have you discovered?”

“Besides having an unexpected ward?” Jack teased.

“That we can discuss later, the poor girl. I meant, as you well know, with regards to the other matters you have been asked to look into.”

Philip moved closer and explained their investigations into Mr. O’Connell. Then Jack more quietly described what he had seen in the park with Mr. Feathers, and what the ladies had seen several times in front of Mottram Place.

“I need not tell you what the implications of that could be,” Wellington said with a frown that would make enemies quake. “We cannot be too diligent in this case, however. While we will give Lloyd the benefit of the doubt, we should also be cautious. I will be speaking with him next.”

Wellington left them and went on to speak with Lord Mottram and Major Lloyd as if he had not just heard they might have a traitor in their midst.

“He is a cool one,” Jack remarked, watching him with admiration.

Philip’s mother walked by and Jack made her a bow.

“I trust the two of you will do your duty tonight?” she asked both of

them in a matronly way.

"Of course, Lady Everleigh. I am at your service."

She rapped his arm with her fan. "I knew you were a good one, Jack. Do keep Philip in line."

"When did you know Wellington would be here, Mother?"

"About five minutes before you did, my dear," she said with a smile.

"If you need me to leave so you shall have a seat at the table..." Jack allowed his voice to trail off.

"Not a bit of it, you rogue."

"I am only trying to be helpful," he said, winking at her.

Ignoring this impudence, she began to pair the gentlemen with those ladies they were to lead in to dinner, and Jack was none too put out to discover he was paired with his ward. Socially, they were at the bottom of the barrel, so to speak.

"What is your opinion so far?" he asked as she took his arm.

"Thus far, I have had Lady Maria constantly by my side and it has only been half an hour. The real test comes when the ball begins."

"Surely you are not concerned you will be left without partners?" he asked, taken aback.

"Of course I am. No one knows my name."

"Allow me to reassure you, Ward. I fully expect to be fighting off gentlemen with my sword!"

"You would not!"

"It was an allegory, my dear. Nonetheless, I do think you will be sought out far more than you think. Your name is already on the lips of many a hopeful gentleman."

To a typical debutante in the *ton*, this would have been splendid news, but Miss Rafferty looked mortified.

"I take it you are not pleased?" Jack asked, trying not to laugh.

Her brow furrowed. "I suppose the truth is, I do not know what to think. After all, no one knows of my portion or anything about me. Why should my name be on their lips?"

"To be seen on the arm of the Season's beauty is enough for now," he said, hearing the thick sarcasm in his voice.

Then she surprised him by making an indelicate snort.

They entered the dining room last in the procession and soon found their place cards next to each other. He helped her into her chair and then waited while the other ladies were seated.

For someone who spied for a living, he was staggered by his reaction to Miss Rafferty. Spies were renowned for their ability to remain calm in

stressful situations, yet he could feel his pulse racing and his palms were clammy. How his colleagues would laugh at him, to know he was bested by a female and one who was out of bounds to him at that!

"I think, Miss Rafferty," he said, once he was seated beside her, "that we should probably discuss exactly what your wishes are for the future."

"If I knew, I would be more than happy to tell you, sir."



Kate was nervous. She knew she was being ridiculous, but she could not help it. She had never been to a ball and she felt distinctly out of place. She was reassured of her looks based on the reaction of Captain Owens and Captain Everleigh, but she knew very well that it was not the gentlemen of the town she had to conquer, but the females. Some—no, most—of the girls at school had hated her because of her beauty. Maria was one of the few who had always been kind to her despite everything.

Having Lady Mottram's support, and possibly Lady Everleigh's too—if only reluctantly—would mean a great deal.

Nevertheless, she intended to stay out of the way and not put herself forward. She knew there would be those who would dislike her regardless of how demurely she behaved.

She stayed mostly by Maria's side while guest after guest was announced. More officers in regimentals arrived and the group of bright uniforms stood out amongst the crowd.

By the time the dancing began, there had to be over five hundred people in the ballroom.

"Would you care to dance?" Captain Owens asked, appearing out of nowhere. "Since Wellington stole my waltz, I thought I might as well lead you out for the first set."

"I thought you only waltzed," she remarked as she excepted his proffered arm.

"I said the waltz was the only one I was accomplished at. I at least know the steps to the others."

She laughed and very much doubted he was poor at any of them.

"And thus far, does the ball meet your expectations?"

"Do you mean, since you asked me last?" she replied, taking her place in the set.

"That was before dinner; practically a lifetime ago," he countered with a grin. "Now you have seen a true crush, at the height of the Season in one of the most fashionable houses of the *beau monde*," he said

with added aristocratic inflexion intended to make her laugh, which it did.

The music began and she curtsied while he bowed and they stepped forward and their hands met. Kate was taken aback at how the touch of a man's hand could affect her. Would it be this way with every gentleman?

She hoped not, because she did not care for the disorder her senses felt.

"Have you any dances left?" he asked knowingly as they spun about, elbow to elbow, face to face—well...almost. She had to look up into his face.

"I have two remaining."

"They will not be free for long. Has Wellington taken the supper dance?"

"No, Lord Philip has."

A flash of danger, or perhaps anger, flashed across his face before he hid it. She looked away, not wanting to dwell on it. The dance separated them and she was forced to take a turn with another gentleman. When she saw Mr. Feathers coming toward her, she had to fight the instinct to recoil in disgust. At least that answered one question, but she could not yet ponder its meaning.

His countenance was stiff and cold, as was his clipped tone. "Good evening." Beyond her own cool greeting, they did not converse, and Kate was relieved when she returned to her place in the line to await another turn with Captain Owens.

"Are you quite well?" he asked when they met again in the center.

"He is a cold man," she answered.

"You must be careful not to display your opinion so openly."

"How can I not when you warned me away from him and when his actions grant such suspicions? You did not explain your warning, and I took my instinctual feelings toward him as justification of your comments. I think now you had better explain what you meant by it."

Captain Owens smiled down at her as though they had been discussing the weather. She forced a smile to her own face, knowing he was correct. Her face had always spoken her thoughts even when her mouth had not.

She next met Major Lloyd in the center for a turn, and while he was certainly not a warm man, her senses did not recoil as they had with Mr. Feathers. Was this a sign that he was innocent? She certainly hoped so, for Maria's sake.

"Are you enjoying your first ball, Miss Rafferty?" he asked.

"I am, though it is certainly a little overwhelming. I had not expected so many people."

"I have always found great irony in the fact that a hostess does not consider an entertainment a success unless there are too many people there to breathe or converse easily. The purpose is only to see and to be seen and never truly know anyone well."

"Yet this is where one is supposed to choose a mate," she responded, adding after a slight pause, "on the great Marriage Mart."

"Precisely," he said with a hint of approval in his gaze. It was likely to be the most she would ever see from him, she reflected, lowering her gaze in case her face betrayed her.

When she took her last turn with Captain Owens, he smiled but did not look pleased.

"You were very friendly with Lloyd," he remarked.

Was that a hint of jealousy she detected? Why did that please her?

"He was quite pleasant," she said, knowing it might make him bristle.

"He is another one to be cautious with, I need not tell you."

"Yes, you need not tell me." She bit back a smile as she turned away from him.

Captain Owens had been correct; she had partners for every dance. Gentlemen said the oddest things to her. They were full of false compliments and requests to drive her to the park. What nonsense it was when they had no notion of her at all! They had discussed no more than where she was from and the weather!

Now it was time for the supper dance and she looked about for Lord Philip, who had claimed the set. As he would be hard to miss in his regimentals, and she desperately wanted some fresh air, she slipped just outside the terrace door and waited until she could see him approaching.

The fresh evening air was a welcome reprieve from the crush of sweaty bodies and overly fragrant perfumes. It was a unique experience to be at a ball like this, to be sure, but it was not something she would ever long for again if she retired to the country.

She continued to look into the ballroom from just outside the open doors, but while she still could not see any sign of Lord Philip, she was unconcerned. It was his home and his mother might have needed his assistance. Kate was perfectly content to remain where she was.

The music began and she gave a slight shrug. The Duke of

Wellington came to claim Maria, but there was still no sign of Lord Philip. The hairs on her neck began to rise and she had the distinct impression that she was no longer alone on the terrace. Hesitating to move and give away her position, she leaned slightly backwards into the shadows, while continuing to watch for Lord Philip.

In all likelihood it was someone else seeking a reprieve from the heat indoors, but something heightened her awareness and the feeling only grew stronger. The sensible course would be to step back across the threshold into the ballroom, but supposing whatever or whoever was there was connected to the threats against the prince or even the Duke of Wellington?

A slight movement behind her caused her to tense, and slowly she turned her head to see what it was that had her nerves strung as tight as a bow.

She could see nothing in the darkness; whatever it was was well hidden in the shadows of the night. As her eyes adjusted to looking from the terrace out to the garden, she could have sworn she saw a pair of eyes staring back at her. She shivered unconsciously and her blood froze with indecision.

“There you are!” a familiar voice said from behind, startling her.

She turned and forced a smile to her face, more grateful to see Captain Owens than she probably should be.

“Captain Everleigh was detained and asked me to find you.”

“When I did not see him, I stepped out here for some fresh air.”

He looked down at her with concern. “Is something amiss?”

She could hardly answer truthfully. “I think I became overheated.”

“Why do we not go in to supper now? I know I do not care for these routs without fortification.”

She clutched his arm with relief and stepped back into the safety of the ballroom.



Chapter Ten

Jack could not find Kate anywhere. Having seen Feathers creeping about, Philip had asked Jack to take his dance for him. It made admirable sense, since Philip knew his own house and grounds better and could follow the man without raising questions. When Jack could not find her, he had been surprised at the degree of panic he felt. His relief, on finding her unharmed, was equally unlooked for.

As they entered the supper room, there were no other guests present and a number of servants were making what appeared to be the final preparations. Jack led Miss Rafferty to a table tucked into an alcove where they could have some privacy.

“What are you not telling me?” he asked, pulling out a chair for her.

“How did you know?” Her eyes widened with surprise.

He spread his hands and gave a slight shrug. “Experience. Did you overhear something or see something?”

“I cannot be sure, but I would swear someone was watching me while I was standing on the terrace.”

“Why, then, did you stay out there?”

“Because I could not be sure. It was more of a feeling, and I thought if I discovered who or what it was it might be useful.”

He leaned forward and growled, “Do not try to help. You put yourself in jeopardy by doing so.”

Her face tightened at the scold. “Therefore you now think to tell me how to behave? I was merely trying to be useful.”

“I do if it is on my behalf; much of my work is dangerous,” he said quietly.

She narrowed her gaze and he could tell by the way she compressed her lips that she had bitten back a retort.

“Look,” he said more softly, “It is my belief you do not understand who we are dealing with. These people kill for a living and they would not hesitate to snap your neck. Your death would be explained as a terrible accident, swept under the carpet so as not to raise ticklish

questions.”

Miss Rafferty looked mortified.

“Indeed.” He nodded. “Therefore, while I appreciate your telling me of your discovery of the fourth gentleman’s identity *and* the possibility he was signaling to someone at Mottram Place, you will put yourself in danger by doing anything more. Do you understand? I am not simply being a tyrannical guardian who thinks females incapable, I assure you.”

She pursed her lips, but also gave a slight nod.

“Some of the most effective spies are females,” he muttered.

She leaned forward. “I will be more careful, sir, I promise. I only went outside for a little fresh air and was there but a few minutes.”

Guests began trickling into the supper room and Jack looked up to see Philip approaching. He raised his arm in greeting.

“Miss Rafferty, forgive me. I trust you were not too distressed by my absence,” Philip said as he took her hand and kissed it in regal fashion.

“I was perfectly content, I assure you. I assumed you had something more pressing to attend to.”

“You are very gracious. Would you like me to fetch you a plate of refreshments?”

“That would be very welcome.”

Lady Maria came over. “May I join you? My partner had to leave unexpectedly.”

“Of course,” Jack said, standing up and inclining his head. “I will fetch you a plate. We will be back shortly, ladies.”

As soon as they were out of hearing range of the ladies, Jack immediately looked at Philip. “Did you discover anything?”

“Feathers definitely went to the garden. I saw him watching Miss Rafferty on the terrace, but he slipped away after you took her inside. I do not know if she interrupted an intended assignation, but he left after that.”

Jack cursed.

“Just so. I was hoping to catch him in the act, but perhaps he just wanted to watch her. She is not exactly a chore to observe.”

“Stow it,” Jack growled, but Philip only laughed. “You may cease at any time.”

“It is very amusing to watch you play a parental role.”

“I am not her parent.”

“No, but you want her and do not think you can have her. It is highly entertaining.”

“I am glad to be of service. Now, what should we do about

Feathers?”

“I have put Sheldon on the task. He will follow him and see if anything comes of it. In the meantime, we are to watch Major Lloyd’s movements. I really do not care for him being our villain,” Philip remarked as he piled a plate high with lobster patties, roast fowl and prawns. “Maria likes lobster,” he murmured to Jack. “And strawberries,” he added.

“Perhaps we should trade?” Jack suggested.

“No, no.” Philip shook his head. Jack suspected there was more between Philip and Maria than either was ready to acknowledge, but he would store that tidbit away for later.

They returned to the table and settled down to enjoy their meals.

“Thank you,” Kate said as she accepted her plate. “There is a veritable feast on this plate!”

“Enough for a small army,” Maria agreed, surveying her own with a chuckle.

“What do you think of your first ball, Miss Rafferty?” Philip asked.

“It is quite delightful, though I admit it is more overwhelming than I would have supposed.”

“Yes, my mother will be delighted with the turn-out.”

Maria leaned forward and spoke quietly. “I saw Gabriel slip outside before the supper dance, but I was unable to follow him, for I was dancing with Wellington at the time.”

Jack and Philip exchanged glances.

“Where did our fearless leader have to go?” Jack asked.

“I believe the Prince called him to the Palace.”

“I suppose that is a valid reason to leave.”

“What do you suppose Gabriel is about?” Maria asked. “And at what point should I warn my father?”

“I would say nothing,” Philip responded immediately. “As far as we know, he is trying to gather the same information we are.”

“Lady Maria, I will say to you what I said to Miss Rafferty before you arrived,” Jack interposed. “I appreciate you telling us what you saw, but you must be careful and promise not to seek to discover anything further.”

“This is not child’s play,” Philip added.

“I have never thought it was,” Maria answered as if she had been slapped.

“People kill without thought in our line of work,” Jack added hastily.

“Speaking of brothers, yours has just entered the room alone,” Miss

Rafferty remarked.

Lady Maria turned to watch. "He looks very harassed. Not that he ever looks very happy."

When supper ended, Jack and Philip escorted the ladies back into the ballroom to their next partners. Jack noticed Major Lloyd leaving.

"I think we should also make our exit," he said to Philip, inclining his head toward the door.

"And risk my mother's wrath?" Philip shook his head. "No, you go, and I will meet up with you later."

"Sometimes there are benefits to having no attachments," Jack reminded himself as he gathered his hat from the majordomo and stepped out into the night. His first inclination was to head toward the club, so he followed it, but stopped off at his house to change into less conspicuous attire. As he made his way down Piccadilly, he reflected on the evening and how much he had enjoyed his ward's company. She was more than a beautiful face, certainly, and it would not be long before suitors started knocking on his door for permission to call on her, take her driving in the park and—heaven forbid—pay their addresses. He ignored his primitive reaction to that thought and stepped inside the club.

"Good evening, Captain Owens," the porter said.

"Evening, Sergeant Hathaway. Have you seen Major Lloyd this evening?"

"As it happens, I have, sir, but he came in and left quick-like. He met a couple of other gentlemen and took off to Benedict's, they said."

"Thank you, Hathaway. Could you be so good as to pass that on to Captain Everleigh if he should come here tonight?" Jack asked as he slipped the man a coin.

"It would be my pleasure, sir," he replied. Turning, Jack went back out into the night.

Gaming hells were not Jack's pleasure at all, and he hesitated before going alone. Benedict's was a place where reputation mattered not—only the depth of a man's pockets. He could return to the Everleigh ball and wait for Philip, but he would be more unobtrusive on his own.

He climbed down the steps to the dark entrance and was admitted upon knocking. His eyes had difficulty adjusting to the dark room, which was filled with smoke and had only a few candles near each table. It was surprisingly quiet for the number of bodies packed into such a tight space, but he could feel the tension in the air, as the stakes here were high.

No one turned at his entrance, thankfully, and he slipped through the crowd like a predator stalking its prey. A large crowd was surrounding a spinning wheel; he saw someone roll the dice and heard a gasp as they waited for the outcome.

A loud cheer went up as the roller was successful, and Jack slid past as the tension was relieved in the room, if only for a brief moment. As he neared the far corner of the dim saloon, he spied his target. Feathers was sitting at a table with the other three men Jack had seen in the park. But how was he to breach their sanctum?

After watching discreetly for some time, he realized they were not actually playing cards, but were deep in discussion. If only he could get close enough to see and hear! This would be an excellent time to be a female, he thought ruefully. If he could pretend to be a serving girl or light-skirt, he could have sidled right up there with no one the wiser. Alas, he would never be able to accomplish that disguise.

Some movement alerted him to the fact that he was in danger. He spun about, only to come face to face with Major Lloyd.

"What the devil are you doing, Owens?" he growled.



Kate watched Captain Owens leave and felt dejected. It was ridiculous, of course.

"What, do you suppose, they meant by that?" Maria asked, joining her to watch them leave.

"I wish I knew. It was quite a scold they gave us. I had had the same lecture myself, minutes before you joined us."

Maria made a huff of disapproval. "What shall we do next?" she asked. "I do not mean to sit idly by while my brother might be suspected of treason."

"I do not know what else we can do, Maria," Kate remarked. "We do not have access to the same places as they, nor do we have their experience. I believe them when they say these people will kill without hesitation."

"We must do something," Maria protested.

"I think we have already done something by being observant. They will not say anything without irrefutable proof, and I am certain they will try to keep their investigations as discreet as possible in consideration for your family's standing in Society."

"Perhaps you are right. I have had my fill of observing for tonight.

My feet do not want to take another step.”

“There I must agree with you. They really ought to make dancing slippers more comfortable,” Kate remarked with a chuckle, stretching the toe of one elegantly encased foot until it was visible and rotating it beneath the hem of her gown. The pointed shape was pinching her toes even though the goatskin was very soft.

“Do not let Mama see you doing that! She would at once deliver a considered and lengthy discourse on the evils of displaying one’s appendages in public.”

On that note, they sought out Lady Mottram, and as the hour was by now rather advanced, they made their curtsies to their hostess and soon were on their way home. Having listened to Lady Mottram prattle all the way back to the house, Kate was grateful to seek the solace of her chamber. However, once she was lying in bed, her mind would not settle. She kept recalling the warnings from her guardian and Lord Philip, but also the sensations Major Lloyd and Mr. Feathers had elicited within her during their dances. If Mr. Feathers had indeed been on the terrace, then Captain Owens’ warnings were well placed. She had no doubt Feathers would snap her neck without thinking twice about it.

Part of her wanted to fetch her book from the library so she could escape into the much more pleasant world of *Sense and Sensibility*, where, the worst things to have happened so far were the Dashwood ladies having to move to a new home and Mr. Willoughby’s subsequent betrayal. Not that those were not significant events, of course, but no one was being murdered.

That reflection made her think of Gothic novels she had read where a visiting young lady would be attacked were she to venture downstairs alone in the dark. Kate laughed at her silliness. It was surely at least four o’clock in the morning. At this hour no one in the household would be awake; not even the servants would be about.

She threw back her coverlet and lowering her legs over the side of the bed, found her slippers and robe. Taking up her taper, she carried out into the passage and lit it at one of the wall sconces before climbing down the stairs to the library. Despite her admissions to silliness, her heart still beat faster and she hurried along the empty corridor.

She stopped short when she saw a light coming from beneath the library door. Who could be awake at this hour? She blew out her taper and edged closer.

There were two voices she was able to make out—both masculine—and she was quite certain one belonged to Major Lloyd. Who, though,

was the other man? The tone was low and gravelly and she strained to hear the words.

"I believe they have rumbled us," it said.

"Nonsense. Drink?" Lloyd asked. She heard the sounds of liquid pouring and glass clinking against glass.

"I am telling you, they are suspicious."

"Be that as it may," Lloyd replied, "suspicions are not proof."

"No, but it makes our task that much harder if they are watching every move."

"You just keep them occupied. No one can know what we are really about if they are busy worrying about the celebrations."

"Aye, I suppose you are in the right of it," the other voice said, "but I'm telling you we need to be chary, what with Owens turning up at the hell and Miss Rafferty..."

Kate gasped at the mention of her name.

"I took care of Owens. He and I are on the same side, so I do not think there will be any trouble on that front."

Kate frowned. What did it all mean?

"You think he believed you?"

"Why would he not?" Lloyd asked haughtily. "You and the others continue to divert their attention and I shall do the rest."

"It is too risky," the other argued.

"I do not see we have any choice," Lloyd argued. "I fully intend to carry this through."

The tone in his voice caused Kate to shiver. She knew she should leave before she was caught eavesdropping, and yet did not want to miss any pertinent information to pass on.

"Have you any suspects for the stolen papers?"

Kate leaned closer to the door with anticipation. She had heard nothing of stolen papers.

"No. They are deeply concerned, but they have no clues. Now that Wellington has arrived, I expect a fire to be lit at Whitehall with what was stolen."

"It is best to continue to divert attention, then."

"You concentrate on the task at hand and I will worry about Wellington."

"What about Miss Rafferty and your sister?"

"What about them? They are silly young girls."

"There is something about that Miss Rafferty which gives me pause."

"You and every warm-blooded male in London," Lloyd snapped.

“Forget about her—and my sister. They are harmless as long as you are not looking to wed.”

Kate scowled at his tone. She would very much like to know the identity of the other man in the conversation.

“I am for my bed now. I have an early meeting,” Lloyd said, causing Kate to jump. It was hard to think rationally and not seize up with fear. *Move, Kate.*

The door opened before she had convinced herself to action. She shrank back into the shadows, trying to become one with the paneling behind her. Her heart was thumping so loud and her breath was so shallow, she was certain to be discovered. Her eyes strained to see, to discover who the second man was.

Although the odor of cigar registered upon her senses as the two men left the library, from behind Kate could not make out who the second was.

Turn around, turn around, she willed, to no avail.

As they reached the front door, Lloyd stepped forward and opened it for his guest.

The man passed through without uttering another word or turning back. Lloyd shut the door and paused, looking around as if he sensed her presence. He shook his head and then proceeded up the stairs, each step echoing on the marble and sending fear up her spine. When she finally heard the door to his chamber close, she stood still for several more minutes, trying to let her breathing slow.

She then hurried back up to her room without daring to relight her taper. She climbed into her bed and trembled with fear, wondering how she could make it until she could tell Captain Owens everything.



Chapter Eleven

After the confrontation with Lloyd, Jack had left the gaming hell more convinced than ever that something was going on. Would Lloyd divulge the truth at the meeting this morning? Had Jack almost broken his cover? He had wrestled with the problem during the few remaining hours of the night and was now waiting for Philip to join him for breakfast before they left to go to the War Office. He sat nursing a cup of coffee in the breakfast parlor, wishing he was going to his bed instead.

Wethersby entered and paused. "You have a visitor, sir."

"Yes, I am expecting him. Please show him in."

"A young lady has called to see you, sir."

Jack's brows raised in question.

"Miss Rafferty, sir."

"Then by all means, show her in!"

Wethersby leaned forward and whispered. "She is alone, sir."

"Then she must have a good reason for being here," he said briskly.

Standing up, he walked into the hall to greet her.

"Kate? What is wrong?" He held out his arms and clasped her hands with concern.

She looked around as though to see who was listening, so he led her into the breakfast parlour and closed the door.

"You seem a little discomposed. Are you quite well?"

She nodded, but she was no simpering miss and she was clearly disturbed. He held out a chair for her and eased her into it, before pouring her some coffee and sitting next to her.

She took a deep breath and then began to tell him what she had witnessed the previous night. He managed to contain himself and allow her to tell her story without interruption, but by the time she haltingly told him the second man had mentioned her by name, Jack was boiling with fury.

A knock on the door heralded Philip's arrival, and Jack repeated the

essentials of the tale to him while he breakfasted.

"We must go to a meeting," Jack then informed Miss Rafferty. "Do you feel able to return to Mottram Place? You should not wander about Town by yourself! If you are not comfortable there, we will find another situation for you."

"No, no, I will be well enough, on both counts. Major Lloyd did not see me, I feel quite certain."

"Promise me you will never venture downstairs alone again."

"I need no warning," she said, "even in the daylight! But if I were to leave suddenly, he might become suspicious."

"Very true. However, you cannot say a word to anyone about your suspicions of Lloyd—especially to Maria," Philip warned.

"I hope you are a good actor," Jack added. "I cannot like this."

"Nor I, but it must be done—for now at least," she conceded.

Jack hoped her bravado would carry her through once she was back there.

"We will take you back on the way to our meeting. I will call on you this afternoon," Jack said.

Once they had escorted Miss Rafferty safely back to Mottram Place, Jack and Philip climbed back into the waiting hackney.

"This is worse than we thought," Jack began.

"How I wish she had seen who the second man was," Philip remarked.

"It could still be Feathers," Jack pointed out. Their suspicions of him were already heightened.

"I think she would have known if it was he."

"What do you propose we do?"

"We must have more proof before we act. Lloyd thinks you believe him to be investigating those other men. I think we should try to discover who they were. After our meeting, we can seek out Sheldon."

When they entered the meeting room, Jack was unsurprised to see Wellington had joined them.

"Forgive our tardiness, sir. We had a slight diversion on the way here."

Wellington gave a nod in acceptance of the apology and indicated for them to sit down. "Make your reports first," he said, looking at Lloyd.

"I have a group of four men I am watching with a view to being accepted into their circle."

Wellington rubbed his chin. "I see. Is there a connection?"

"I became aware of them through searching the visitor logs."

“Do you think one of this group stole the papers?”

“That is what I am trying to discover.”

Jack did not allow himself to glance at Philip to see his reaction, but Lloyd’s smooth declaration was too coincidental.

“Very well. Knight?”

“Sir. I have not had much success. I, too, have been trying to narrow down who had access to the documents at the time they were stolen. All I have been able to ascertain is that it was not someone from outside.”

Knight’s information contradicted what Lloyd had just said, but Wellington and General Newsom did not point that out. Jack cast a subtle glance at Lloyd, but he did not fidget or squirm. Of course, he was trained not to.

“And the two of you?” Wellington turned to Jack and Philip.

“We obtained a list of known threats to the King or Prince. We have narrowed this down to two likely suspects but, so far, have ascertained no plausible threat or means to carry out such an act.”

Wellington sighed. “I need not tell you we have little time remaining in which to ferret out the traitor.”

Each of them acknowledged that fact.

“We have a guard set around the clock, near the parade grounds, but I want this weasel found. Look anywhere and everywhere. Anyone with French connections—anyone with a record of discord amongst the ranks—anyone who is desperate for funds.”

“Knight, you and Lloyd take that tack, Everleigh and Owens, continue to investigate the threats to the celebrations.”

“Yes, sir.” Saluting smartly, they began to disperse.

Wellington and Newsom then entered into a low-voiced conversation, so Jack and Philip waited.

“You are barking up two different trees,” General Newsom insisted.

Wellington shook his head. “My instinct says otherwise.”

“However it is, we had better find the culprit and fast,” Newsom said before leaving the room.

“Are you waiting for me?” Wellington asked when he noticed the two of them remaining.

“Yes, sir. There is something we are obliged to tell you and you will understand the need for discretion,” Philip replied.

“Of course.” He held his hand for them to sit back down and Jack closed the door behind him.

He then relayed what they had discovered thus far about Feathers’ and Lloyd’s possible connection.

Wellington cursed. "I need not tell you the ramifications if he is our traitor. We have to be utterly and completely certain."

"Yes, sir. It is why we have said nothing to anyone else, but we thought you would wish to be careful with what information is disseminated."

He ran his hand over his face and looked away as though lost in thought. "Yes. It would appear so. I will think more on it, but you did the right thing in telling me."

Jack and Philip departed, leaving Wellington deep in concentration. Outside in the corridor, Felix Knight was waiting for them.

"Owens, Everleigh, I wish to speak with you," he said. "Privately," he clarified.

"Of course. We may go to my house," Jack offered.

They left the War Office and sought their horses before returning to Half Moon Street, where they gave their mounts into the charge of grooms at the mews.

Once inside the house, Jack ordered a luncheon to be prepared for the three of them and led his comrades into his study. The door snapped shut behind him and he looked at Major Knight expectantly.

"I suspect you have found some of the same information I have," Knight began, "and that is why you were discussing with Wellington in private."

"Do you mean with respect to Lloyd?"

"Yes. It seems he is the most likely suspect to have taken the documents, but it makes no sense to me."

"I cannot help but think there is some different play at hand, and yet I cannot think what that might be," Philip agreed.

"Precisely. What motive would he have? I have been scavenging deep and cannot find anything – no French roots, no heavy debts, no grievance against the army or the government..."

"That we know of," Jack added.

"So he must be trying to penetrate some group in order to catch them, but why not let us in on the game?" Knight asked. "That is why I kept mum. I wanted to discuss it with you and see if I was reading too deeply into it, but when I discovered you had come to the same conclusions, I thought it best to pool our resources and wits."

"Lloyd has always been somewhat solitary. Perhaps he wants to go out on his own?" Philip suggested.

"For glory?" Jack asked, the idea repugnant to him.

"I find that doubtful, but there has to be a very good reason for him

to risk his own neck and his family name,” Knight said.

“Perhaps that is the answer. Is there something deeper within the family that we are as yet unaware of?”

“The Mottram earldom goes back centuries,” Philip put in defensively, as though the idea of such an old family being traitorous was preposterous.

“Then that is a lot of skeletons to look for in a lot of priest holes,” Jack drawled.

“Your ward is aware of the situation and in a perfect position to search...” Philip suggested.

“A horrible idea if ever I heard one! She has no training – and no idea of what she would be facing.”

“Thus far she has been an admirable informant,” Philip argued.

“Would either of you care to explain what you are talking about?” Knight asked.

Philip took it upon himself to explain about Miss Rafferty—that she was Jack’s ward, and what she had discovered, painting it in a light that suited his purposes, of course. Jack was not pleased.

“And what of these drawings you asked Lady Maria to sketch?” Knight asked.

“Over here,” Jack said as he went to fetch them from the desk.

Knight studied them carefully. “And you saw these three men with this Mr. Feathers?”

“We believe so,” Jack answered. “Do you recognize any of them? The drawings are rough, but captures the general essence of the men.”

“I believe I know one of them. Lieutenant Jennings, famous deserter of Badajoz. He escaped while we were in prison together.”



Kate was concerned, yet there was little she could do. It was nerve-racking to be under the same roof with a possible traitor, and yet staying at the house might help her discover more to help Captain Owens.

How devastating it would be for Maria and her family! Could there be a way to catch Gabriel Lloyd and hush everything up? She dearly hoped so. She wanted Mr. Feathers to be the villain, not her dear friend’s brother.

When Kate had returned from visiting her guardian, Lady Mottram and Lady Maria were out paying calls on a close friend. Kate hesitated to

go back into Mottram Place without Maria, but surely, she was being silly? It was daylight and Major Lloyd did not appear to suspect her of anything other than being a witless female.

She fetched her book from the library and withdrew to her sitting room upstairs. Lost in the trials of Marianne and Willoughby, Kate was able to forget about her own concerns for a few minutes—until there was a knock on the door, causing her to jump.

Instead of calling enter, she went to open the door herself. She did not want just anyone coming in when she was alone.

It was a footman. “Miss, there is a caller for you.” He proffered a silver salver with a calling card on it.

“Captain Owens,” she said, reading the inscription aloud. “Tell him I will be right down.”

Breathing a sigh of relief, Kate tidied herself in the looking-glass and grabbed her bonnet just in case. She desired to be outside, and hoped he would oblige.

“Captain Owens!” she exclaimed when she found him alone in the drawing room. “Good afternoon. Are you well?”

“Miss Rafferty.” He made a quick bow. “I am well, and yourself?”

“Thank you, I am also well.” She paused awkwardly, sensing there was more.

“Do you have time to accompany me for a drive?”

“I do. Lady Maria and Lady Mottram are out. Allow me a moment to leave word for them. Do I need my maid?”

“I have brought an open vehicle, and I would rather speak to you alone, if possible.”

“You are also my guardian,” she said wryly.

“I have not forgotten,” he returned in a disgruntled tone that made her smile.

Outside, a smart phaeton, pulled by matching greys and held by a groom, was waiting for them.

“Did you purchase a new vehicle?” she asked.

“No, this belongs to the Everleigh household and I happen to have a connection there,” he said as he assisted her up.

“It is very smart, but I have never been so high off the ground,” she remarked as he joined her and took the reins from the groom.

“Does it scare you?”

“Not as long as you know how to drive it.”

Instead of answering, he laughed and expertly wove the greys through the traffic to the park.

It was a lovely day, one of those rarities without a cloud in the sky. Everything was in full bloom and the birds sang their approval as the carriage bowled along.

"Has something happened?" she asked, once they were going at a gentle amble along one of the carriageways.

"No, not a great deal more than you already know. It seems that another one of our sources also suspects Lloyd is the most likely person to have stolen some papers from the War Office."

"Oh, dear. I have been hoping desperately that this was an awful mistake."

"It still might be." His voice held a warning. "We would still like more proof that he is acting on his own and not for someone else."

"Yes," she agreed quietly, although her mind raced.

She heard him hesitate before he spoke again. "Much though I hate to put you in this position, my superiors would very much appreciate any more information you are able to obtain. However, as your guardian, it is incumbent upon me to say you need not feel obligated to do anything more. You are putting yourself in a great deal of danger."

"I have already considered that, and it is the right thing to do."

"I do not want you to go out of your way and raise any suspicion," he added.

"What further proof are you looking for and what kind?" she asked. "Lady Maria has already searched his chamber and the study, finding nothing."

He looked over at her. "Lady Maria did that?"

"Oh, yes." Kate nodded. "She is full of pluck. If her brother is involved in any wrongdoing, I would not put it past her to strangle him herself."

Captain Owens laughed. "I think I like your Lady Maria, though I should not make light of his actions."

"No, indeed. He sounded so self-righteous last night. If only I could place the other gentleman."

"Speaking of gentlemen, have you found any who have stirred your interest?"

She looked sideways at him beneath her bonnet. "Not to any particular degree. Why do you ask?"

"I have already had three gentlemen request permission to court you."

"No! It must be a jest!"

"I assure you, there is no joke. One of them is even a rather

respectable gentleman who had already drawn up the very generous settlements.”

“But how absurd!” she exclaimed in disbelief.

“The *ton* is very strange, but Lord Summers assures me you would make his old age quite pleasant to endure.”

“He must be eighty at the very least!”

“Oh, yes,” Captain Owens agreed, “but he assures me it will be worth it.”

He looked at her astonished face and laughed again. “My dear, just be flattered. No need to take any of it seriously, you know. Nevertheless, you will apprise me, will you not, if there should be someone you would have me consider?”

She shook her head. “There is no one, sir. Why, I have hardly had the opportunity to speak to any gentleman about more than the weather.”

“That hardly matters in the *ton*, but I assure you there is no hurry.”

“Do I infer you have resigned yourself to being my guardian?”

“What else could I do? It is somewhat different from how I envisaged, having met you, I will admit.”

“I should be flattered, I suppose. It cannot be pleasant, having to worry about me while having these other considerations on your mind.”

“You have been useful, so far,” he teased.

“I aim to please,” she retorted sardonically. “I confess I do not enjoy idleness, although there is some fascination to being in the city. I had always wondered what it was like and what delights it held.”

“If there is anything I can show you, you need only to ask. I find London is pleasing in small doses.”

“I am certain I should be ready by the time I return to the country,” she said, reflectively.

“Do you have a particular place in mind?” he asked as he negotiated a corner.

“No. Without knowing my circumstances, I had not dared to dream.”

“You are welcome at Winterbourne for as long as I own it,” he said graciously. “Not, I will add, as a servant,” he clarified.

“You are very kind to offer, but it is time I stood on my own feet. You will not be my guardian for much longer.”

He muttered something inaudibly under his breath and drove on in silence. Kate gazed at the passing scene and repressed a chuckle. As they made their second circle of the park, Captain Owens waved to a few of his acquaintances.

"Is this what fashionable folk do, drive or ride around in circles all afternoon?"

"Oh, yes. Anybody who matters in Society goes in circles," he said in a serious tone.

Reluctantly she had to admit she enjoyed his sense of the ridiculous, and was growing more comfortable in his presence.

"In actual fact, I am hoping we will see our four friends again."

"You consider them to be friends now?"

"Everyone is a friend until they are no longer."

"Duly noted. It was much earlier in the day when we saw those gentlemen. If they are plotting something nefarious, I hardly think they would risk meeting in such a public place out when the whole of Society is."

"This is the time to be seen, and that is why it is one of the best times to blend in. I speak from experience. No one suspects anything."

"Then I stand corrected and I shall pay more attention!"

"If only my soldiers were so obliging."

Kate bit back a riposte about allowing females into the ranks. "Have you had any success in discovering who the other three gentlemen are?" She glanced up at Captain Owens' finely chiseled face and saw his jaw clench. She could see that he had and that the news was not good.

"Yes, we know who another one of them is," he said as he slowed the horses to navigate through a crowd. "The name will not mean much to you, I am afraid, but Major Knight recognized one of them as a former soldier. He escaped from prison, then deserted after Badajoz and has not been seen since."

Kate glanced at her companion's stern profile. "You believe something caused his desertion and he is now plotting his vengeance?"

"It would seem so."

"Then he will have nothing to lose, will he?"

"No, and that is what I am afraid of."

"Yet it would also seem Major Lloyd has everything one could want."

Captain Owens blew out a frustrated breath. "Yes, and that makes him even more dangerous than Jennings."



Chapter Twelve

“Watch your elbow!” Jack scolded Philip in a loud whisper.

“There is nary room for one of us to move, here in this delightful hiding place, let alone two!” They were hiding in a recess, next to where the sewage ran freely through the street. One wrong step and either of them would be ankle deep in odoriferous sludge.

“Are you certain Sheldon was right about this place?” Jack asked doubtfully.

“He would hardly send us here for fun, would he?” Philip retorted.

“They never pick nice places with fragrant gardens. Such holes are always near sewage, or the docks, with rotten fish—or both,” Jack grumbled. He tried to reposition himself, but his legs were going numb from being squashed into the small nook near an abandoned warehouse, where they were watching for Feathers, Jennings, and their compatriots.

“I think we should go closer and see if we can get inside.” Jack was not the most patient man for a spy.

“I would prefer to find out who else we are dealing with before we rush in and find ourselves outnumbered.”

“I did not say *rush* in,” Jack corrected. “How long have we been here, anyway?”

“Only half an hour. You are as bad as a small child in church,” Philip muttered.

“At least we have crossed O’Connell from the list,” Jack sighed, trying to distract himself with thoughts of other things.

“Yes; Sheldon said a gentler soul he had never met.”

“I have never been fond of mixing politics with religion, though I know it is what most wars are fought over. Not Napoleon, though. At least we can give him credit for that. He is just a greedy blackguard who lusts after power,” Jack rambled.

“Mm.”

“I still cannot understand Feathers and Lloyd. There has to be a large piece of the puzzle we are still missing.”

"You know what they say—everything comes down to money, power or religion," Philip added.

"Did we not just rule out religion?" Jack asked, exasperation in his tone.

"Ah, but only for Napoleon—and possibly the Irish, in this case."

"What would cause Lloyd, and even Feathers, to want to betray their country? Besides disgust with Prinny, that is?"

"Quite. I think the plot on the celebrations is distracting us from the stolen papers. But why? We need to look deeper into Lloyd's affairs, much though I want to trust that he is simply attempting to penetrate the enemy's organization. The thought of what this would do to Maria..." His voice trailed off.

"You care for her," Jack said, as a matter of fact.

"We used to play together as children. She is an uncommon female. Yes, I like her—and your ward?"

"I like her as well," Jack answered flippantly, knowing his friend was searching for deeper answers.

"Do you ever see yourself settling—marriage, setting up your nursery and becoming as dull as ditchwater? We cannot do this forever," Philip's voice took on a philosophical tone.

"No, but no doubt we will replace the old codgers at Whitehall one day, when we can no longer jump over fences or climb on roofs."

"I just wonder if opportunities for happiness are going to pass us by and we will wake up old men wishing we had done things differently." Philip sighed.

Jack shrugged. "Sometimes I wonder if things had been different, but what is the point? It is akin to wondering how things would have been if you had been the first born, which is distinctly pointless and becoming entirely too philosophical for me."

"I think I see movement." Philip hushed Jack. The door to the warehouse opened and the gentlemen came out. It was difficult to see in the dark, but Mr. Feathers' dandyism did them a favor for once, as his walking stick and high shirt collars marked him clearly.

One man walked away in one direction with Feathers, and the other two went off together.

"Shall we separate?" Jack asked.

"I think it is safer to stick together. I should like to come back and look at the warehouse in the morning. There is always a reason for choosing such places."

"Besides being abandoned?" Jack bantered.

“To store things...like explosives?”

Jack ignored the taunt and eased out of his hiding place to trail along behind the gentlemen. They were on foot, which made it easier unless they got into a hackney.

Philip followed at a short distance, for less of an imprint, and the men did not seem to notice they had shadows. Jack could make out some of their conversation as they walked through the slums of Wapping into Limehouse. The stench pervaded the air even at that hour of the night and people were sleeping in doorways and passages for shelter. A few ladies of the night hollered at, and even appeared to tempt, the two men.

Jack stopped and waited, blending into the buildings. A swift glance over his shoulder informed him Philip had done the same. After a few moments, Philip crept closer. It appeared the men were trying to decide whether to stop for a diversion.

Jack looked back at his comrade in annoyance. Philip merely shrugged and shook his head.

The light-skirts appeared to know the two men, and Jack took note of the surroundings so he and Philip could return and question the women later.

“Lookin’ for some luvin’, guvnor?” One of the women sidled up to the smaller of the two suspects wearing a bright red gown that did not hide her assets.

“Slow night, eh? Sorry, but we got work to do, Sally.”

“Too good for the likes of us, now, are you? All I’m trying to do is earn a livin’,” she snapped and hunching her shoulder, turned to the other man. “How about you, Big Joe? Can you handle some Sally?”

“No, he wants some Maisie, he does,” said the other. The two jades began to posture against the second man.

“Ladies, ladies!” Big Joe puffed out his chest and held out his hands. Jack very much feared he and Philip were finished for the night as he tried to listen to the exchange, hoping for any scrap of information.

“I do not think it is my fancy to wait here for them to finish,” Jack remarked.

“Not on your life. My soft, clean bed beckons me,” Philip agreed.

“At least we have names and some people to question tomorrow.”

“No need to fight, ladies!” the smaller man shouted, stepping between the imminent scrimmage. “Here’s a little something for both of you,” he said, flipping a coin toward each trollop. Each one greedily grasped the spinning silver out of the air.

"Mighty gracious of you, dearie. Have a good 'un." They began to hurry away from the men toward Jack and Philip.

"I would hurry away too, if I could get coin for free," Jack said as they waited to intercept the females.

Once Big Joe and the other fellow were out of sight, Jack and Philip stepped forward to greet the women.

"Ladies," he said, making an exaggerated bow. He had found, long ago, that at heart all women wanted to be treated like gentlewomen.

"Well, well, well. What have we 'ere, Maisie?" Sally asked with a wide grin, revealing one snaggle-tooth hanging on its own.

"Ave you come all the way from your fancy houses because you 'eard about Sally?" she asked as she presented her generous wares for his reluctant inspection. He tried very hard not to recoil.

"Indeed, you are just the ladies I should like to see." He fished a shilling from his pocket and held it up just out of her reach. "It looks as if this might be your lucky night," he said with a grin.

She narrowed her gaze. "I've got me standards, I do. I'm not the sort for funny business."

"Nothing like that, dear Sally. I want to know everything you can tell me about the two men you were just speaking with."

The other girl spat with distaste. "Sam Turner an' Big Joe."

"Ah... do you happen to know what line of work they might be in?"

"Why is it you wants to know?" Sally narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

Jack pulled out another shilling and Sally's gaze was once more greedy. "Perhaps I need their expertise."

Maisie snorted. "Two stupid oafs without one 'ole brain between 'em."

Jack deliberately moved the shillings around.

"I dunno *pacifically* what they do, excepting odd stuff here and there."

Jack moved closer and asked, in a loud whisper, "Any chance they are good at making things explode?"

Sally stepped back. "'Ow would I know?"

He sighed. "Very well, I thought you were the kind who would know everything that happens hereabouts." He tipped each of them with a shilling, which they grabbed greedily without a word of thanks and hurried off.

Jack and Philip turned and headed back to the High Street, hoping to find a hackney carriage to convey them back to a more salubrious part

of Town.

"The names Big Joe and Sam Turner were not on the list of potential suspects."

"I have a feeling they are small fish, hired to do the dirty work."

"Dispensable pawns," Philip agreed.

"I think our time would be best spent investigating Feathers and Lloyd."

"Tomorrow we can look further into them. The troops begin reviewing in the park tomorrow, so there is little time to waste."



Kate awoke feeling better about all that had happened. Sunshine was pouring in through her window, along with the sweet chirping of the birds, signaling morning's arrival. She and Maria were to ride in the park this morning, and Kate was looking forward to it—realizing more and more how much she missed the country and riding over the estate. Perhaps the proverb was correct and absence truly did make the heart grow fonder. Would she be able to return to Winterbourne without memories of old Mrs. Owens haunting her at every turn?

She did not want to think about the old witch. Rising, she called for Simpson and dressed in a smart new riding habit of deep green. It was in the military style, which was the latest mode, and it even had frogged trimming across the bodice. Thankfully, there was no shako hat to go with it. Kate did not think she could balance properly on a horse with one of those on her head! She did have a jaunty little bonnet complete with a saucy feather sticking up, which she thought was a bit ridiculous, but smart.

She gathered her gloves and whip and found Maria with her maid, having her bonnet pinned in place.

"Good morning! I see you are ready," Maria said. "I am very much looking forward to the exercise this morning. Sometimes it is hard to find time just to ride during the Season. That habit is *de rigueur*! I knew it would be! No one will spare me a second glance, even though I too have a brand-new habit!" Maria laughed.

Kate thought her friend looked quite becoming in a pale blue habit which complemented her pale skin and eyes, but only shook her head and looked heavenward in a humorous show of exasperation.

"I asked Gabriel to select a mount for you. He is an excellent judge of horseflesh, if nothing else," Maria said as she took one last, surveying

turn before the mirror. "Shall we go?"

They climbed down the stairs and went out of the front entrance to where two grooms were already holding their mounts.

One was a handsome bay gelding with four white socks. "This is Socks," Maria said. "You will perceive his original nomenclature. He is very fussy but seems to like me," she laughed. "Who do we have here?" she asked the groom who was holding a horse for Kate.

"This is Poppy, my lady. The master purchased her at Tattersall's just yesterday. 'E said she is a goer."

"Do you hear that, Kate? A goer."

"Well, my dear," Kate said, as she walked forward to greet the chestnut mare, "there won't be any real going here in the park, I am afraid." The horse nuzzled her hand and let her stroke her velvety forehead.

Once she and the mare had become acquainted, the groom assisted Kate into the saddle and she settled her skirts. They walked the horses to the park and then began a gentle trot along Rotten Row. The park was quite different at this early hour of the morning compared with later in the day, when the fashionable thronged the paths. Now there were mostly gentlemen out exercising their horses, and nurses, sitting on iron seats placed along the Serpentine, watching their employers' children playing in the grass and feeding the ducks.

Maria took the lead and sent her horse into a sedate canter.

Kate's mare was more than willing and the two of them rode to the end of The Row and back again as fast as they dared without actually galloping, and Kate felt enlivened once more. They drew rein as they approached the Keeper's Lodge at the end of the bridle-path.

"It is a lovely day. It almost makes me miss the country!" Maria said, looking flushed and quite pretty.

"What is happening over there?" Kate asked, directing her friend's attention to the flat fields stretching away to their left.

"I believe Gabriel said something about the troops being reviewed this morning." She waved her hand. "They all line up and stand very still for the commander's inspection. They practice it a great deal, apparently."

Kate could not help but laugh. "Shall we go and watch?"

"Why not?" They turned their horses toward the Great Walnut Avenue and found Captain Owens and Captain Everleigh standing beneath an ancient walnut tree, also watching.

"Good morning, ladies. I trust you are well?" Captain Everleigh

asked.

“Indeed, it is a glorious day!” Maria answered cheerfully, looking at the soldiers in formation. While there was a sea of red uniforms, in among were also a number of green and blue, with some on foot and some on horseback. “So, this is called a review?” she asked, looking perplexed.

“Yes, our troops practice formations, marching and sometimes shooting, for the commander to see and give his approval to—or, in some cases, say what needs to be improved upon,” Lord Philip answered. “Today is a rehearsal of sorts for the celebrations.”

“Oh, so that is why you were watching,” Maria remarked.

“I suspect your perpetrators are as well,” Kate said, thinking aloud.

“Indeed,” Captain Owens concurred.

“And where will you be positioned? Do you not need to practice being still?”

Jack laughed as he patted his horses’ nose. “Adonis and I are well practiced, I assure you. We will ride in with the Prince and his entourage.”

“I trust the park will be well guarded,” she remarked.

“Even as we speak.” Captain Owens inclined his head and smiled.

Kate looked around. It seemed far too vulnerable a place to hold such festivities, but she supposed they knew what they were doing.

“Will the duke himself be here this morning?” Maria asked.

“I have not yet seen him,” Lord Philip answered. “One never knows with the Field Marshal.”

“I think I have seen enough. Ladies, may we escort you anywhere?” Captain Owens asked.

“We will probably take another turn or two about the park. Would you care to join us?” Maria asked.

“That sounds delightful.” They turned their mounts back toward the southern end of the parade ground and filed in beside each other, Kate next to Captain Owens and Maria next to Everleigh.

“It is a lovely day. I would much rather be doing this,” Captain Owens said.

“Have you made any more discoveries?”

“Not many, I am afraid. We did discover a meeting place, but it appears the other two men are simply hirelings.”

“That does not surprise me,” Kate replied. “It seems something like this would not be a large, organized plot. It is far too dangerous for that.”

He looked at her surprise. "That is a very astute observation; one that many experienced soldiers might not make."

"Thank you. It seems somewhat obvious to me. The more people involved, the less likely it is to be successful."

They crossed the wide concourse near the main entrance and on reaching Rotten Row again, urged their horses to a trot behind Maria and Captain Everleigh.

"As your guardian, I must tell you that it would offend all the tenets of polite behaviour if we overtook them," Captain Owens remarked, his mouth curved in a wicked smile.

"I thank you for the warning, sir. I was quite certain it would not be the thing, especially since such a strict guardian would not wish me to be observed racing in public."

"I daresay he would not," he said, looking as disappointed as a child who had not been allowed his pudding.

Kate laughed and then saw a series of flashes out of the corner of her eye.

In the same instant, Poppy tossed her head, almost snatching the reins from Kate's grasp, plunged sideways and snorted. Kate was an excellent horsewoman and followed the mare's sudden movements, but she would not be calmed. Prancing and sidling, sweat darkening the sleek chestnut neck, she grew more and more agitated, her nostrils flaring.

She jerked forward, lifting Kate off her seat and, without warning, the mare reared high in the air. It happened so fast, yet time seemed to slow around them. Kate knew what was happening, yet felt powerless to stop it. As Poppy came down, Kate's weight shifted to the right and the grip of her right leg loosened around the pommel.

"Kate!" Maria cried.

"Miss Rafferty!" Captain Owens shouted. Kate saw him attempt to catch her horse's reins but it was too late. By now thoroughly upset, the chestnut lunged, throwing Kate completely before running away with her head in the air and her reins trailing.

Foolishly, Kate reached out her hand to break her fall; she ought to have known better. She heard a loud snap and pain seared through her arm.

Captain Owens loomed above her, clearly hesitating between the need to catch the horse and the desire to help her.

"Fetch the mare. I am not badly hurt," she called, though she doubted the words as she said them. She was feeling distinctly unwell,

and could not bring herself to look down at her arm, which at the moment felt as if it had been separated from her body.

Maria dismounted and hurried over to her. "What happened? Oh, my!" she exclaimed when she saw Kate's arm.

Kate closed her eyes. It would not be the first such exclamation. "Do you happen to know of a good doctor?" she asked calmly, although she felt oddly light-headed.

Her guardian and Captain Everleigh had regained control of her mare and rode up, leading the animal, to where Kate and Maria were waiting.

"She needs a doctor!" Maria said, making hand motions toward Kate's arm as though not saying the words would somehow make it better.

Captain Owens knelt down before her. "Why did you not say anything?"

"She needed to be caught, and a few minutes will make little difference."

"You need it to be set at once. It will feel much better once that is done," he explained.

"I will take your word for it," she said, trying to bite back a further caustic retort and stay as still as possible.

"Help me get her up on to Adonis, then we can lead her mare to my house," Captain Owens said to Captain Everleigh.

"Your house?" Maria asked. "Should she not rather return to mine?"

"No, my dear Lady Maria, because this was no accident. I will have Miss Rafferty where I may keep my eye on her."

"She cannot be there alone with you at your house! I shall come with you. Help me to mount, Philip, if you please."

Kate did not much care where she was taken so long as the pain stopped. It was agony enough, being lifted on to her guardian's horse. Once she was perched on the flat military saddle with Captain Owens behind her, the jarring pain caused a mass of bright lights to dance before her eyes and she fainted clean away, which was probably just as well.



Chapter Thirteen

Jack paced across the floor in his study, vaguely registering the patterns on the carpet.

“You saw the flash?” Philip asked. “You are certain?”

The look Jack sent Philip would have made any other man, who did not know him so well, quake.

“For God’s sake, she could have broken her neck!” Jack heard the panic in his own voice.

“I am well aware,” Philip said calmly, “but this is the time to stop and think clearly, not lose our heads. If we were not close to our target, they would not be trying to warn us off...if it was indeed intentional.”

“It could have been meant for me. I was riding next to her.” Jack ran his hand through his hair as he continued to circle the room. He had too much pent-up anger to be still.

“For that matter, it could have been meant for any of us. Flashing a mirror is not a precise tool.”

Lady Maria knocked on the open door. “May I come in?”

“Yes, of course. How is she?”

“She is resting now. The doctor gave her some laudanum before he reset the bone and splinted it.”

Maria walked over and selected a chair next to Philip. She sank down into it. “This was not an accident, was it? Kate is one of the finest riders I know.”

“Good riders can only do so much when the horse decides to bolt.”

“But something caused the mare to react in such a violent manner.”

“We suspect so,” Jack agreed. “Is the mare normally reliable?”

“I could not say. Father purchased her the day before at Tattersall’s.

Jack’s eyes met Philip’s. “You don’t say?” He had to remember that Lady Maria was unaware of the conversation Kate had overheard between Major Lloyd and another man, in which he had implicated himself.

“Who chose the horses this morning?” Philip asked.

"I had asked Gabriel to pick Kate a suitable mount. He is excellent with horses, you must admit."

"No one could dispute that. I consider it essential to explore everything, my lady."

"The mare had been perfectly behaved the entire time before we met you."

"We checked the saddle and there was nothing amiss there," Jack admitted.

"And the horse seems calm now," Philip added.

"What are you going to do now? Do you really plan on keeping Kate here?" Maria asked.

"It is too risky to do otherwise," Jack argued.

"Even though you are her guardian, people will talk," Lady Maria warned.

"Better for people to talk than for her to be killed," he argued. "No one will be any the wiser if she stays inside these four walls."

"You need a chaperone."

"I am short of those at the moment," Jack retorted.

"She is right, Jack," Philip said. "You do not want to put her in the untenable position of having to marry you to save her reputation."

"Untenable, am I?" Jack snorted. "That would please my old granny. She will be laughing from her grave."

"While I do not think compromising her is the way to go about marriage, I do think the two of you would make an excellent match," Lady Maria said primly.

Jack did not know what to say to that, so he remained quiet.

"I will ask my mother," Philip put in. "I am certain she will know of some respectable lady who could provide chaperonage until this is resolved."

"Heaven help me," Jack muttered. "Very well, but I get to meet the person first."

"I will ask Mother to send over Kate's belongings," Maria said, standing up. "May I send one of your men?"

"Yes, of course. Thank you."

"I will return home now to speak with my mother. May I escort you, Maria? I should be pleased to see you there."

Maria looked at Jack and he gave her a nod. "She will be comfortable for a little while."

Once they had left, Jack considered what to do. He was perfectly willing to find Feathers and Lloyd and strangle them both barehanded,

but by the same token he wanted to outmaneuver them and catch them at their treason. Now it was personal – he wanted to see them pay for their duplicity. Philip was correct, now was the time to close in on their target. They were close. Very close.

He knew that in all likelihood he was rewriting his future by keeping Miss Rafferty at his house, but he was responsible for her and he would not be able to live with himself if something happened to her. Being under the same roof with Lloyd...well, he did not think Major Lloyd would attempt to injure her at his parents' house, but it certainly put her at a higher risk of seeing or hearing something that would make her death a necessity. Clearly the scoundrel was already suspicious. He must somehow have seen her eavesdropping in the hallway that night. This was not a childish prank, and Lloyd knew how to be deadly. It was what they and Philip were trained for, after all.

However, before he made the final decision, he would go and speak with Miss Rafferty. He was not such an ogre that he would force her. He could try to find some other accommodations if she so wished. She was intelligent enough to understand the ramifications.

Jack walked upstairs to see how she did, knocking softly on the door, which was cracked open. She was tucked into the bed, small and still, only her red hair visible. He found himself going into the room and drawing close to the bed. Perhaps a chaperone was for the best, he thought, gazing down at the trim figure.

She looked so peaceful and beautiful lying there that he felt his heart clench over what had happened to her that afternoon and what could have happened.

Without thinking, he took her uninjured hand in his and watched her sleep, noting the bruising on the limb. It was hard not to want to seek immediate vengeance, for his heart wanted revenge. His head knew they had to make certain they had the right person first. He had a duty to Miss Rafferty, but also to King and country.

He realized he was squeezing her hand and let it go. He looked at her face and saw her watching him.

"Forgive me. I wanted to see how you were doing," he said.

Her deep blue eyes seemed to be studying his face. "I will mend, they say."

He pulled up a chair and sat down beside her. "I made the decision to bring you here in haste. If you would prefer to stay elsewhere, I will understand, as long as it is not back to Mottram Place. Too many things could happen there."

“Will it not make them more suspicious?”

“You could have been killed.”

“Yes, but the incident could have been intended to happen to any of us, if it were not mere accident.”

He shook his head. “It is too risky. Everleigh is consulting with his mother about a chaperone.”

“It hardly matters,” she said quietly. “You are my guardian, so it is quite permissible for me to be here. I do not intend to stay among Society, so my reputation is of little consequence.”

“It matters to me! And I think it will matter more than you can, at present, realize. My biggest concern is that you will be compelled to marry me. I am not a fortune hunter, I assure you.”

“I know that, sir.” She smiled slightly and added, “I had not entertained such a notion. The only thing that matters is to find whomever is responsible before something dreadful happens.”

He nodded distractedly. “There is little time left to do so. Nonetheless, there has to be a way.”

“What if he was accused openly, say in front of your commander? Or perhaps not accused but questioned about it?” she suggested.

Jack shook his head. “It would make you more vulnerable by revealing your knowledge of the conversation. And without knowing the identity of the other man involved...”

“If he has a plausible explanation, then Major Lloyd would be ruled out,” she countered.

“And if he does not? If he denies it, then we are no further ahead and we have shown our hand.”

“No, we do not wish to do that,” she answered. “There has to be a way to catch him.”

“Is there anything else you can remember about the second man that night?” Jack asked.

She closed her eyes. “It was very dim in the corridor. He smelled of cigar smoke.”

“That helps a little. Is there anything else? Was he taller than Lloyd?”

“No. He was definitely shorter, perhaps to Major Lloyd’s shoulder, and he was more thick-set.”

“Did he appear older or younger?”

“I cannot be certain, but I would say older. His voice was gravelly but still educated.”

“Did he have hair or no?”

She pursed her lips. "Now that I think about it, I would say no."

"Would you recognize him, do you think?"

She screwed up her face adorably. "Perhaps. I could not say."

"You have remembered a great deal more than you thought to."

"I daresay, that when you asked me specific questions, it was easier to recall what I saw than I would have imagined. Where do you think we might find him?"

"We? We are staying in bed to rest. *I* will try to find our mystery gentleman."

"Nevertheless, you will require me to recognize him," she argued.

"Perhaps I can find some possible subjects and have you identify them from afar."

"There is no time for that!" She continued to argue, maintaining she was quite stout, even though he could tell she was fading.

"You can barely keep your eyes open," he replied, trying not to laugh.

"Well, perhaps a nap would not go amiss. I will then be ready to assist you tonight."

Her eyes were closed before he had gained his feet. He shook his head as he left the room, determined she would go nowhere until the traitor was caught.



Being an invalid did not suit Kate's disposition, and she knew she could be better employed in sallying forth to help search for the second gentleman. He had to be someone who would be a member of Society or at least assured enough to enter Mottram Place.

When she sat up in the bed, it took some time for the room to stop spinning. Her arm was still very painful. Nevertheless, Kate decided she could manage as long as she kept it still.

She rang for Simpson, who came into the room with a worried look on her face. "Yes, miss? Should you be out of bed?"

"Simpson, I am perfectly well. I need your help to dress for the evening."

"Does the master know about this?"

"The master? What has he to say to anything?"

"He says you are to stay in bed while you recover and to bring you whatever you ask for."

"Aha. You are to give me whatever I ask for, and I ask to dress."

Simpson narrowed her gaze into a frown. "I am sure that's not what he meant, miss."

"Are you in his employ or mine?" Kate asked, growing irritated.

"I could not say, miss," the maid answered doubtfully.

"I will make it very clear, then. I am your mistress, and if you cannot answer only to me, then I might have to release you from your position."

"Please don't do that, miss!" Simpson pleaded. "The captain only wants what's best for you and so do I."

Kate sighed. "I know, but this is a very serious matter or I would not be putting myself to the bother. I must help Captain Owens. I am the only one who can identify a person who means to cause a great deal of harm."

"Is he the one who caused your accident?" Simpson asked shrewdly.

"How did you know about that?" Kate asked.

"It did not take much to put two and two together, miss. I will not say anything, but now I understand better why it matters to you."

"Then please help me to dress," Kate said.

Dressing with a splint on one's arm was far more difficult than Kate could have imagined. Then, trying to fashion a way to cover it so it did not stand out like a sore thumb, presented another challenge. In the end, Simpson made a sling out of a dark fabric that blended in with her dress.

Kate knew Captain Owens would not approve of her going anywhere, but she was determined. Slowly, she descended the stairs and joined him as he was gathering his hat and sword to leave.

"Good evening," she said.

He spun about and scowled when he saw her dressed for the evening. "What is the meaning of this?" he demanded.

"This means I am going to the ball with you."

"Under no circumstances. Number one, Lady Everleigh has not yet sent a chaperone. Number two, you sustained a bad injury today and need to rest. Number three, someone is trying to kill you! Number four..."

"Sir, I believe you should stop there before you make a foolish strategic error like forbidding me."

"It had occurred to me," he admitted.

"Would it not be a wiser course to know where I am? I will stay with Maria or Lady Mottram and no one will be aware there is no chaperone here. They will all assume I am still at Mottram Place. I will not be

dancing, but observing from the side.”

She watched him consider each of her suggestions. His face was like an immobile mask, except for his eyes. She could tell he liked none of the options.

“Will you not at least admit you need my help?” She raised her arm slightly. “I now have a vested interest in catching him as well.”

He blew out a breath of exasperation. “Very well, but I must know where you are at all times. You must go nowhere alone. Is that understood?”

“Perfectly.” She tried not to show her pleasure at having won this round, for it was not truly pleasure but the desire to see the traitor caught and punished.

Captain Owens draped her shawl about her shoulders and led her to the hackney Wethersby had waiting for them. He helped her climb into the carriage and settled himself next to her. It was a disturbing moment. She never had a large male sit next to her before. It was overwhelming and yet very domestic at the same time. She was comfortable with him, yet not.

It was all very confusing.

“Where are we going?” she asked, instead of dwelling on her thoughts.

“Lord Worth is hosting the ball tonight,” he remarked.

“I have yet to meet him.”

“He is a vocal supporter of the military and Parliament. In fact, he is General Newsom’s elder brother. He is one of my superiors.”

“Then I shall be especially nice to him.” She laughed.

“Oh, no. Please do not toady to him.”

“You did not think I was serious?” she asked in mock offense.

“Let us say, I hope not. I might truly have to lock you in your room for that.”

When they arrived, amongst a large crowd, no one seem to pay them a great deal of mind. However, when they were announced, Kate could see people whispering. Was it on account of her accident?

She leaned forward and spoke in Captain Owens’ ear. “Aunt Bertha is our chaperone if anyone questions it.”

“Aunt Bertha is still alive?” He looked down at her with a comical face.

“Oh, yes. She is blind and deaf, but was very much alive when I left her at Winterbourne.”

“I always liked Aunt Bertha,” Captain Owens mused aloud.

“Unfortunately, she was unable to stand up to her sister.”

Ignoring the whispers, they moved forward into the ballroom. Indeed, perhaps Kate was imagining them, because Captain Owens did not seem to notice. She suspected he was more perceptive than he made out, however.

Lord and Lady Worth greeted them, an older but amiable couple.

“Owens!” the gentleman exclaimed. “Glad to have you here. Glad indeed,” he said, shaking his hand. “And who do we have here?”

“This is Miss Rafferty, my ward.”

Kate dipped a curtsy and she felt Captain Owen’s steadying hand on her uninjured elbow as she rose.

“What happened, my dear?”

“An accident with her horse in the park, I am afraid,” Owens explained.

“Today?” Lady Worth looked concerned. “You should be abed!”

“My words to her exactly, but she would insist.”

“I am perfectly well as long as I keep my arm steady. It is my intention merely to sit and watch and enjoy the music, my lady, rest assured.”

“If you need anything, you have only to ask, Miss Rafferty,” Lady Worth said as they moved on down the line.

“I think we should quickly find you that seat where you may observe before more questions are asked,” he said.

“I see Lady Maria and Lady Mottram. I will go to them,” Kate answered, amused by his protectiveness.

“I shall escort you there,” he said, not letting go of her arm.

“Kate!” Maria exclaimed when she saw her. “What are you doing here?”

Captain Owens shook his head. “She would not be dissuaded. I will say no more.” He led her to the nearest chair and helped her to sit down. “She assures me she will only observe. May I leave her in your care?”

“I do not plan to dance,” Lady Mottram answered. “I will make sure she does not exert herself, and she can explain to me why she is no longer staying at our house.”

“Thank you,” he said, bowing over the countess’s hand.

“You will still do your duty, Maria,” the countess warned.

“Yes of course, Mama. I had not thought to do otherwise.” She cast Kate a look of conspiracy. “I will bear her company until the dancing begins, if you should wish to circulate.”

“Very well.” Lady Mottram waved at a friend and wandered off.

Maria sat in the chair next to Kate. “Has something else happened? I cannot believe you are here!”

“I could hardly lie in my bed all evening knowing I could sit and observe and be *useful* here.”

“I suppose I would feel the same, but could you not have at least rested for one day?”

“There are only three days left until the celebrations!” Kate reminded Maria.

“Of course, that is so.” She shook her head.

Kate looked around, thinking Maria could tell her who people were. She caught Captain Owens watching her and she smiled sweetly back at him. Currently, he was surrounded by a group of officers also dressed in their regimentals. She looked from soldier to soldier and dismissed them as she went. Too tall, too young, too much hair... her gaze passed an older gentleman and then immediately went back to him. Her breath caught.

Kate nudged Maria. “Who is that gentleman speaking to Captain Everleigh?”

Maria looked and then frowned. “I do not know.”



Chapter Fourteen

Jack was watching Miss Rafferty's face and he saw her expression change. What had happened—or what had she seen? She was staring in his direction as though she had seen a ghost. Yet the only people near him were Everleigh, Knight and Newsom. He tried subtly to signal to her, but her expression remained fixed. Turning, he looked about the room. Perhaps she was looking at someone behind him? Had she seen the second gentleman?

Lord and Lady Worth were in conversation with Lord and Lady Mottram, so he knew they could not be the reason for her look of shock. He needed to speak with her, but he would have to be discreet. While she could not dance, the first set was promised to Lady Maria, so perhaps she would mention what had troubled Miss Rafferty.

The orchestra was beginning to sound more in tune, indicating that the dancing was about to begin. He excused himself from his friends and made his way over to Lady Maria.

"My lady, shall we take the floor?" He held out his arm to her, casting a questioning look at Miss Rafferty, who gave a small shake of her head. Later then. 'Twas not what he wished for, but she could hardly blurt out her suspicions in a crowded ballroom.

They took their places in the set and he bowed before his partner. It was a minuet, so they had a few moments in which to speak.

"I am worried about Kate," Lady Maria said.

"Indeed? Has something happened?"

She gave him an incredulous look.

"Besides what has already happened," he clarified.

"I believe she has seen something or someone tonight."

"What happened?" He struggled to continue dancing.

"We were conversing one moment, and then in the next she seemed upset and asked me who a particular gentleman was."

"Who was the gentleman?"

"That is what concerns me. I did not recognize him."

"I would have suspected you of knowing everyone amongst the *ton*," Jack bantered.

"I do have an extensive acquaintance, it is true," she responded, her eyes twinkling as she agreed with his assessment.

"Can you tell me anything about him? It might help us to narrow down who orchestrated the attack on Miss Rafferty in the park."

"I think it was the gentleman you were speaking with; an older gentleman in uniform."

"But that is...impossible," Jack said as he realized she meant General Newsom. The general was the one who had set Jack and the others the task of finding who was behind the plot against the Prince and the stolen papers.

Could it have been an elaborate diversion? It was bad enough that Lloyd appeared to be knee deep in the plot, but Newsom was the head of the War Department, answering only to the Secretary of State. It was an unthinkable betrayal. If he was involved, then no one was to be trusted.

Could he be such an accomplished actor?

"Perhaps there was someone else behind you who she saw, and I am mistaken," Lady Maria suggested in the face of his obvious disbelief. "Or maybe it is a horrible case of mistaken identity."

"Perhaps. I will speak with her after our set." Jack's mind continued to race with the implications and ramifications of such a betrayal within the ranks of England's military, while his gaze wandered over to where Miss Rafferty was sitting with the dowagers. To his dismay, she was not alone. Mr. Feathers was standing next to her, speaking with a cool, social smile. What the devil was going on? And how deep did the duplicity run?

"He is not a pleasant man, and I do not believe Kate cares for him. Shall we rescue her?" Lady Maria asked, clearly having followed his gaze to Miss Rafferty and Mr. Feathers.

He held out his arm with a nod and led her back to the side of the ballroom bordering the garden. A line of potted plants and two rows of chairs flanked the doors leading to the terrace, which were propped open to admit the cool evening breeze. Feathers looked up when they approached, his beady eyes assessing, challenging. Jack's senses were immediately alerted, ready for any excuse to dispose of the man. Instantly, he studied Miss Rafferty for any signs of distress.

"I was enquiring after Miss Rafferty's health," Feathers began. "Having heard she had suffered a fall, I was surprised to find her here,

looking so well.”

“Word of such calamities spreads quickly, I fear,” Miss Rafferty said, showing a bold face, but he could perceive pinched lines of worry behind her smile. He wanted to scoop her into his arms and take her home where he could protect her.

It was a disconcerting thought.

“As you can see, though, sir, I am quite well. ’Twas but a minor injury to my arm,” she answered.

“You are very brave, Miss Rafferty. I am relieved to hear no serious damage has been caused,” Feathers said.

Jack sensed that the popinjay was fishing for information, so he deliberately directed the conversation in that direction. “Something caused her horse to shy,” he said.

“Oh, indeed? I suppose that is a common enough occurrence in such a busy place and on an unfamiliar horse.”

Jack wanted to know how Feathers had become privy to such information.

“Lloyd was telling us about the sad affair,” the man added, as if reading Jack’s suspicions. “He was feeling guilty for having mounted you on the new mare.”

“It was simply an accident. It could have happened to anyone with any horse.”

“You are very gracious,” Feathers replied, appearing satisfied with Miss Rafferty’s answers. He excused himself to find his next partner, and Jack sat down beside Kate.

“Could it have been him?” he asked quietly.

“I would like it to be. He makes my hair stand on end.”

“I agree that is usually a reliable indicator, but could he be the second gentleman?”

She narrowed her gaze as though re-considering. “No. I am afraid not.”

“I want it to be him,” Jack said after a moment of reflection.

“It would be much easier that way,” she agreed. “I am afraid the older man you and Captain Everleigh were speaking with earlier bears a great deal of resemblance to the man I saw that night.”

“I cannot tell you the fall out that will occur if he is the traitor.”

“Perhaps he simply bears an uncanny resemblance to Major Lloyd’s companion. I was across the room from him. I will attempt to draw closer.”

“I daresay I might arrange that. I do not want him to grow

suspicious.”

“’Tis hardly possible for me to stroll into the card room and ask him if I may have a better look at him!”

Jack gave her a look such as his father had given him when he had been impertinent as a child. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath. When he opened them again, she was smiling sweetly at him. “Very well,” he said resignedly, “what was your plan?”

“I thought to make subtle excursions, like visiting the retiring room and fetching a glass of lemonade.”

“Oh no, no; you will soon be besieged by gentlemen offering to do that for you.”

“Is it necessary?” She looked as though she had tasted a glass of sour lemon juice instead.

“It is unavoidable, I am afraid. Perhaps you could take a turn about the room on my arm if you feel up to it? I have not promised the set to anyone.”

“I believe if you are there to hold me up, I can manage,” she replied sardonically.

“You have a sharp tongue, my dear,” Jack said appreciatively.

“Your grandmother frequently remarked upon it,” she agreed.

“Then I must say what a lovely quality it is.”

“I am much obliged, sir,” she said, chuckling as he held out his hand to assist her to her feet. She took his arm and he felt buoyed by her closeness and the camaraderie they seemed to have created in so short a time. He hated that she was knee-deep in the middle of this trouble, and he wanted it solved as soon as possible. The thought of her not needing him, of leaving her here alone, saddened him.

“Why so maudlin?” she asked perceptively.

“Gracious, I *am* maudlin. It is such a foreign behavior to me that I did not immediately recognize it!”

She laughed, as he had hoped she would, and they made their way toward the first knot of people and to safer waters...for him at least.



Kate hated to admit how much she enjoyed Captain Owens' company. He made her laugh when she might have otherwise crawled into a corner and cried. He was easy company and that feeling had been missing from her life for the past few years.

“Now you look overly thoughtful,” Captain Owens remarked. “Do

you care to tell me what is on your mind, or are you concentrating on finding our man?"

"I was wool-gathering," she admitted, "but I shall look in earnest now."

They walked along, Jack greeting his acquaintances and introducing her.

"I do not know too many people," he confessed.

"You know more than I do. Perhaps I should ask Lady Maria to take me about?"

"No, that will not be necessary. This serves our purpose and I feel safer if I am here with you."

Kate did, too, but she could hardly say that aloud.

"I suspect the general is in the card room. Shall we venture in there?"

"Will there be any other ladies in there?"

"Tis unlikely we shall see any young ones, but certainly the old, hardened gamesters will be, playing for a penny a point."

Kate laughed again. "Very well; lead the way."

As soon as they walked into the room, Kate could tell something had changed. Her gaze instantly found Feathers and the general speaking in a corner. Feathers looked up and caught her watching him; then the general turned to see what he was looking at.

Captain Owens squeezed her arm. "Do not stare, my dear."

She turned to him and smiled. "Yes, of course. It is frowned upon, is it not? I have been too long in the country, sir, so you must forgive me...but I am even more certain, now that I see him closely."

"We must go and speak with Lady Mottram so it appears that you have a purpose in here."

Kate wanted to be sick there and then. Was it due to her injury or was it being face to face with the knowledge that she had identified the traitor?

"Lady Mottram," Captain Owens said, bowing when they reached her. They made small talk for a few minutes before he led Kate back to the ballroom and her seat against the wall. "Will you be content here by yourself? I promised this next dance to Lord Worth's granddaughter."

"Yes, of course. However, I do not think I wish to remain for the whole evening after all."

"Very well. I will make our excuses once I have fulfilled my duty in the country dance."

Kate nodded and watched him leave. She was decidedly unsettled

and wished the dance would proceed more quickly. It was hard not to feel conspicuous, sitting there alone, now that she was no longer looking for the second gentleman.

Ordinarily, she would have been intrigued to watch the different types of people in attendance, so she tried to do that. The characters were clear when one started to look: the shy young girls, the arrogant older men, the inquisitive dowagers, and the kind gentlemen who made sure the wallflowers had a partner...

The ploy almost worked until she saw Mr. Feathers again, lurking near the terrace doors. She saw him slip through them and had only a moment to make a decision. Grateful she had chosen a dark gown that evening, she slipped through one of the other doors and hid in the shadows.

Her guardian would kill her himself if he knew what she was doing, but they were so close to catching the traitors and she did not wish for another attempt on her life. Next time, they might be successful, she thought cynically.

She stopped to listen and let her eyes adjust to the darkness.

The smell of cigar smoke wafted through the air and she was certain something more was happening than some gentleman merely enjoying a draught of tobacco.

On tiptoe, she crept forward, every step sounded like a crunching twig beneath her feet, yet she had to be close enough to hear. She stopped at the bottom of the furthest flight of steps to the garden, keeping in the shade beneath the balustrade, when she heard voices.

"They are too close," the gravelly voice growled.

"No one suspects the truth," Feathers replied.

"You are a liability, not an asset, and are therefore dispensable."

Kate wondered what that signified.

"Where is it?" Newsom demanded.

"You will never discover it without me."

"Then I must count on the fact that no one else will, either. You have become too much of a nuisance and this cannot go on."

"I have left instructions should anything happen to me," Feathers pleaded, panic evident in his voice.

"You are bluffing."

"I will get them for you," Feathers pleaded. "They are nearby. I can have them to you in the morning."

"It is too late. I will find them on my own. You should not have toyed with me."

Kate heard a loud thud, followed by a groan and a slicing noise. She grabbed onto the baluster with her good hand. She could only imagine what was occurring and knew she must fetch help. She would be incapable of defending Feathers on her own. Running back inside the ballroom, she was relieved to find Lord Philip almost at once.

“What is it?”

“Come quickly, sir. I very much fear that Mr. Feathers has been harmed.”

He followed without hesitation and she led him back to the spot where she had overheard the altercation. No one was there.

“You are certain it was here?”

“Yes. I was standing just over there.” She pointed to the terrace where she had been standing, near the steps that led down to the garden.

Lord Philip looked around at the informal pleasure garden, then knelt down to survey the grass. “Go back and find Captain Owens for me, Miss Rafferty, and try, if you will, to bring a taper or two.”

It took her a few minutes to locate Captain Owens and find some tapers, but at last she saw him, conversing with a plump dowager in a coquelicot turban. She explained what she had overheard to her guardian as they walked steadily, trying to not draw attention to their purpose.

“I shall strangle you if he does not do so first,” he scolded her in a low voice.

“Later,” she agreed absently, too distraught to worry about his rebuke.

Minutes later, they found Lord Philip, who was back in the spot where she had left him.

“Find anything?” Owens asked.

“No people, but I found this,” he said, taking one of the tapers and leading them a few feet into the garden.

There was a dark spot on a gravel path and two tracks scraped through the pebbles.

“What does it mean?” Kate asked.

“It means that in all likelihood Feathers was killed and dragged away.”

Kate gasped. It was what she had feared, but seeing the evidence and hearing them say it out loud made it too real. “Where do you think they have taken him?”

“I doubt we will ever know, but I suspect a body will wash up in the

Thames in the next few days.”

Kate felt bile rising in the back of her throat. “I think I would like to go home now.”

“Of course, my dear. I will escort you there now. Philip, I will meet up with you again later.”

Kate was grateful no more explanations were needed. It was one thing to know murder was a part of spying, but another to actually be a part of it.

“Will you send Knight out here so we shall have another witness?” Lord Philip asked.

“Yes, of course.” Her guardian led her back into the ballroom.

“Can you trust Knight?” Kate asked as he searched the crowd for Major Knight.

“I would trust him with my life. He and Everleigh have been by my side through the whole campaign.”

“I am happy to hear there is someone you can trust. I am beginning to suspect everyone of everything.”

“I, too. I would never have thought it of Newsom...” She heard his voice trail off and suspected his throat was constricting.

He said no more and helped her to climb in the carriage. It was a short drive back to Half Moon Street, and Kate was grateful to feel safe again, away from the evil she had witnessed.

Wethersby opened the door for them, concern etched on his face. “Has something happened, sir?”

“Miss Rafferty is feeling tired. Send for her maid, will you, please?”

“Of course,” Wethersby answered as he closed the door behind them.

“Perhaps a tray would be welcome since we left before dinner,” Captain Owens said. “And a bottle of brandy,” he called over his shoulder.

“There is no need to fuss over me. I will be happy enough to sleep now.”

He continued to fuss, escorting her up the stairs and waiting with her in the sitting room while her maid was sought and food was prepared.

“Are you certain you will be able to sleep? Should I send for the doctor?”

“I will be perfectly comfortable. Do go and find Captain Everleigh and catch whoever did this.”

He looked at her knowingly, as though he believed not a word of her assurances, and that she might never sleep again after what she had heard.

Their gazes locked, and she could no longer be strong. Her chin began to tremble, and her body began to shake with fear.

In seconds, it seemed, a glass of brandy was pressed to her lips. "Take a sip. Trust me."

Liquid fire burned through her as it descended, but the shaking began to ease. Warm arms surrounded her and she allowed herself to sink into the embrace and allowed him to bear the weight of the burden for a moment. He pulled her closer than was brotherly, but she allowed it and inhaled deeply, relishing the warmth. He kissed the top of her head and it was so gentle, so sweet, that she was quite content to stay there.

He sighed deeply, and she could feel the breath against her cheek. "I should go and see if I can help Philip."

She nodded, and allowed herself to be led to a chair while she waited for Simpson.

He squeezed her arm and moved to leave the room.

"Jack?" Her call stopped him and he turned back. "Please be careful."

He inclined his head. "Until the morning, my dear."



Chapter Fifteen

Reluctantly, Jack left Miss Rafferty—Kate—alone with a houseful of servants. He did not think anyone would attack her there, but he would not feel safe until Newsom, Lloyd, and Jennings were caught. Was that all of them, however? How deep did this treachery go?

He arrived at Philip's house and was shown into the study, where his friend was waiting with Major Knight.

"How is Miss Rafferty?" Philip asked as he walked over to the satinwood cupboard containing several decanters of wine, and filled a glass from one of them.

"She was shaken, but doing well, considering."

"It was quite brave of her, if you ask me. Her observations have helped us eliminate the field down considerably," Knight said.

"She is both brave and stupid," Jack agreed as he accepted the drink from Philip and sat in a chair by the mantelpiece.

"That describes all of us," Knight muttered.

"What shall we do now?" Jack asked.

"An excellent question," Knight said. "On the one hand, we have the threat to the celebrations, which are in approximately two days' time now. On the other hand, we have the stolen papers, which are the reason Lloyd and Newsom appear to be dealing with Jennings and the other two ruffians."

"To distract attention from their treason," Philip observed.

"Precisely."

"It seems the celebrations are the bigger problem at present. We have guards on twenty-four-hour watch, but we all know that only goes so far," Jack remarked.

"Jennings is an expert marksman," Knight pointed out.

"Therefore we follow him if we can, but we know that will be impossible if he is aware we suspect him. None of us can be found if we do not wish to be."

"A great point to be mindful of," Philip stated. "I will be prepared to

return fire.”

“Are you sure you wish to do that, Philip?” Knight asked.

He shrugged. “I do not trust anyone else to it.”

“I wish I knew why they are doing this. What would make Newsom and Lloyd betray what they have spent their whole careers working to defend? I would have sworn they were as patriotic as the rest of us.” Philip jumped up and began to pace up and down, his boots echoing dully on the floorboards.

“I believe answering that question is the only thing that will lead us to a quick resolution,” Knight stated.

“Agreed...but what will the fallout be?” Jack questioned.

They looked at each other, concern reflected in all their eyes.

“I pray it is limited to the individuals, but we do not know how long it has been happening or how deep this goes,” Knight answered. “If it is but a recent turn, perhaps only Lloyd and Newsom will be punished.”

“They make an odd duo,” Jack said, considering. “Is there some connection we are missing? I cannot see Lloyd putting his neck in a noose for Newsom, or vice versa.”

“We need proof before taking this to Wellington,” Philip added.

“Our only real evidence is an overheard conversation,” Jack admitted.

“Has there been any fortune in finding the missing documents?” Knight asked.

“I still cannot see the reasoning behind stealing such things here. There is, one would assume, plenty of time in which to change plans and strategy thus far from the sight of action. Were it just before a battle, then that would be different matter.”

“You make a good point, Philip. I wonder if it is more a question of proving that it can be done?”

“Or to draw attention to the fact that there is a secret agent?” interposed Jack.

“Might I suggest the latter?” Lord Marsden said, entering the study on a light tap of the wood, his man, Sheldon, following him. “May we join you?”

“Yes, of course,” Philip answered. “What makes you think it was a ruse?”

“Not a ruse, necessarily, but the papers have been put back.”

All three of them swung their heads in Marsden’s direction. He made a gesture of indifference, with his hands spread. “Newsom says they are accounted for.”

“Allow me to hazard a guess: he has blamed Feathers for the perfidy and claims there is no longer any reason for concern,” Philip replied to his father.

Marsden’s eyes grew wide. “How did you know?”

“Let us just say, a conversation, followed by a possible murder, was overheard in the garden at the Worth ball.”

Lord Marsden did not seem shocked by the knowledge; he just nodded, his face screwed into a frown. “You must give him credit. He is very shrewd.”

“Which papers were stolen, by the by?” Knight asked. “No one ever mentioned details.”

Lord Marsden looked at Knight shrewdly. “I was never given specifics either.”

“Then they could be anything.”

“Time is running out. We must find some tangible evidence before we miss our chance,” Jack said with feeling.

“There is one thread I am following,” Sheldon said, “but thus far I have nothing solid.”

“What is it, man? Do not leave us in suspense!” Philip pleaded.

“From the first, Feathers has seemed the oddity in all of this, so I decided to look into his history...”

The three of them leaned forward, rapt with attention. Jack nodded.

“He was a charity student at Oxford, so I looked further into his situation. He was born in India, but adopted and raised by a country gentleman and his wife in Folkestone. Apparently, he is the natural child of an aristocrat, who paid Mr. and Mrs. Feathers to raise him as their own.”

“And who is the paragon who sired Feathers?” Knight asked.

“Someone who did not wish to be traced. I have had the devil of a time trying to track him down.”

“But you have your suspicions,” Philip stated.

“Indeed. Large sums of money have recently been withdrawn from Lord Worth’s accounts.”

“Worth? I cannot believe it! Blackmail?” Knight exclaimed.

“Worth is connected with Feathers and Newsom, but it still does not explain the threat to Prinny or why the papers were stolen,” Jack added, trying to reason through the conflicting information.

“Unless I miss my guess, money would be the heaviest inducement,” Philip offered.

“Newsom had access to secrets that would garner a hefty price in the

right hands,” Marsden said.

“Desperation breeds treason, you mean?”

Marsden spoke up. “I presume, as you have supposed, that either Worth or Newsom was being blackmailed by Feathers. It seems likely to me that Newsom took the documents and fabricated some new ones in order to sell them for ready cash.”

“Where does Lloyd fit into all of this?” Jack asked.

Marsden shook his head. “I can only hope he is serving two masters in order to gather evidence.”

“It would be obliging if he would confide in us. What do you suggest we do now, Father?”

“Why has Feathers started blackmailing his sire now? Perhaps a visit to his adopted parents would be in order? Who was his real mother? What is he using the money for – apart from clothes?” Marsden prompted them with a sardonic twist to his lips.

“Why does Newsom need money? Is he in debt? Is Wellington playing a clever game? He cannot be ignorant of foul play twice!” Knight argued. “And why the attack on Miss Rafferty in such a risky fashion if they believed she and the boys suspected nothing? Who was responsible and why?”

“I believe that was a warning,” Marsden answered.

“We must act at once before they decide to take any further action,” Jack said with feeling.

“Indeed, time is running out.”



Having slept very soundly, Kate awoke the next morning feeling cheerful, the sunshine coming in through a crack in her curtains adding to her lightness of spirit. Then she remembered what had happened the night before, and her arm throbbed underneath her splint. For a moment, it could have just been a bad dream, but she knew it was not.

She remembered her fall, then the attack on Feathers. Her insides churned violently in response and she struggled to the chamber pot to empty her stomach. Afterwards, she sat on the floor for a few minutes, hoping it was finished. Slowly, she got to her feet and rinsed her mouth of the acidic taste.

It must have been the spirits Captain Owens had given her to help her sleep. What a wretched trade for a few hours' repose!

She walked to the window and spread the curtains wide. It looked to

be a nice day, but what had happened during the night, while she slept? Had they caught whoever had harmed Mr. Feathers? In some ways it was a relief to think he would no longer stare at her with those dark, beady eyes, but she wished such a violent death on no one. In one way, it seemed as though she had imagined it all, but Owens and Everleigh had believed her without question.

Ringling for Simpson, Kate then dressed and made her way downstairs to see if her guardian was at home.

Upon seeing the door open and smelling bacon, she entered the breakfast room. Captain Owens rose to his feet, looking as though he had not expected to see her so soon. He was shaven, yet still in his shirtsleeves.

“Good morning. Did you sleep well?” he asked.

“Too well,” she admitted. “But I do not think brandy overly agrees with me.”

“Eat some toast and eggs. It will help,” he said as he held out a chair for her. He sent a footman off for some eggs and then passed her some toast.

She looked at the food skeptically but took a few bites. It did seem to settle her stomach a little. “Were you able to find out anything of note?”

“Not as much as we would like, but we have been able to make some connections between Newsom and Feathers.”

She leaned forward. “Do you think he is dead?” she asked quietly.

Jack stood up, walked across the room and closed the door.

“We have yet to see a body, but that outcome looked quite obvious last night.”

She nodded. It was also what she thought. “Is there enough proof to arrest him?”

“Not quite. We will continue to look for that today, but also we must stop any attack on the victory celebrations.”

“You have discovered a link?”

“There appears, so far, to be only a loose connection with Mr. Feathers and but a possibility with Lloyd. My superiors are still inclined to believe he is acting the role of serving two masters in this case. In other words, he is still loyal to the Crown while apparently serving the traitors’ cause.”

“Could he perhaps be protecting someone?” Kate suggested.

She watched his brow furrow as his hand paused, with his fork full of eggs, halfway to his mouth. “Perhaps that is the answer. Lloyd likes to work alone, so it is possible he is doing either of those things without

telling us.”

The footman reappeared and placed a plate of coddled eggs before her. Although her stomach roiled at the sight, she took a few bites and began to feel better. “What do you intend to do now?”

“Everleigh and I will go now and search Mr. Feathers’ rooms, not that I expect to find anything. Whoever disposed of him will doubtless have already removed any evidence.”

Recalling the cold, calculating manner in which Feathers had been killed the night before made Kate shiver. “Do you think he was disposed of simply because he did not kill me?”

“I believe he, and perhaps someone else, were blackmailing the wrong person.”

“Is it possible for there to be a right person?”

“Unfortunately, yes. It happens all the time in the *ton*. Indiscretions are a very common circumstance, and while most look the other way, there are those who do not. They will use information for their own gain, sometimes as power and sometimes for money.”

“What a sad way of life.”

“Indeed, but when you have marriages for purely secular reasons, there is very little affection involved.”

“It makes a mockery of the wedding vows.” She shook her head. “My parents were happy together. Perhaps that is why they chose to leave England.”

“I have to admit, a marriage of that sort has never appealed to me either,” Captain Owens said. “Maybe that is why Granny was so bitter.”

Kate chuckled at his tone, and then he looked up at her and smiled. She felt a slow heat wash through her at the look he gave her. It was very domestic—and very dangerous for her thoughts to be wandering in that direction.

Wethersby appeared before them. Had he knocked?

“If you please, sir, there is a lady to see you. She says Lady Marsden asked her to call, but she cannot remember why.”

“Just in the nick of time,” Kate heard Captain Owens mutter as he rose from the table to go and greet the lady.

“I have shown her into the drawing room, sir.”

“Yes, thank you, Wethersby.”

“Your coat,” she whispered loudly, pointing at the article hanging on the back of his chair.

“Ah, yes. We should not put ideas into her head.” He raised one eyebrow and looked at her mischievously.

She watched as he fastened up the buttons of his uniform and she allowed herself to wonder what it would be like to be married; to follow the drum. Before, the thought had been repugnant. But now, she was becoming more reluctant to see him leave. She thought he was not minding her presence so much and perhaps even cared for her a little—witness how he had reacted to her injury, she reflected—but that could be nothing more than his keen sense of chivalry and responsibility. He had made clear his desire never to marry, but she knew better than anyone how much he would need funds to support Winterbourne. The great irony was, if he married her, then he could sell the estate.

Kate knew she did not want a *ton* marriage based on material gain. While aware many young ladies had no other choice, she wished never to have to look the other way or be involved in an indifferent marriage of convenience. At least she cared for Captain Owens and knew he would treat her well. Yet could she stand to be left behind—to come second to his career? She blinked a few times. Indeed, the very union she was considering, was that not a marriage of convenience?

The matter would require more consideration, to be sure. She did not think she could bear to be left alone at Winterbourne again, yet what else would she do? The thought of venturing somewhere alone did not seem so appealing now. Was she really so fickle a creature? Her own reflections disturbed her.

“Will you accompany me, Miss Rafferty?” Captain Owens enquired, curtailing her inner discourse. “I believe this may be your new chaperone.” There was a hint of laughter in his blue eyes.

She rose to follow him, distracted by her strange musings. Perhaps the attack had changed her feelings? Kate followed him into the drawing room and was surprised to see, sitting on the edge of a gold settee, a tiny, elderly lady.

“Good morning,” Kate said, dropping a curtsy as Captain Owens made an elegant bow.

The lady, complete with large bonnet and matching reticule, smiled sweetly up at them.

“I am Captain Owens and this is Miss Rafferty,” he said, making the introductions.

She nodded and smiled but did not reciprocate.

Kate and Jack exchanged glances. Clearly this would be a chaperone in name only.

“And what shall we call you by, my lady?” he asked in his most charming manner.

"Oh, you may call me whatever you wish," she replied absently.

"How do most people address you?" Kate suggested.

"Let me think," she answered, looking very confused.

Captain Owens stepped out into the hallway and she could hear him conversing with Wethersby.

He returned holding a note. He handed it to her.

Dear Captain Owens,

The lady accompanying this note is my Great-Aunt Hattie. She is a sweet old dear, but her attics are quite to let. It was the best I could do at a moment's notice, but if you find her a comfortable chair and give her her embroidery, she will be happy to be there. Also, if you would be so kind, please give her tea and biscuits at 2 o'clock in the afternoon and chocolate in the mornings.

Do let me know if you need further assistance,

Lady Marsden

Kate barely suppressed a chuckle. "I suppose we should find her needlework for her."

"Certainly," Captain Owens replied and left the room, presumably to instruct Wethersby.

"Are you comfortable, Aunt Hattie?" Kate asked, not knowing what else to call her.

"Oh, yes, thank you."

"Is there anything I may get for you?"

"I think I would like to take a nap now. Will you check how Arnold goes on?"

"Arnold?" Kate asked, but it was clear she would get no further explanation. "Why do I not take you to your sitting room? You will be more comfortable there."

"Lovely, my dear," the small woman agreed, so Kate helped Aunt Hattie to her feet and took her arm. She felt so fragile that Kate was afraid she would break. With great care, she led Aunt Hattie slowly up a flight of stairs and to the guest apartment, which had a cozy sitting room, containing a sofa and a writing desk, attached to the bedchamber.

Kate settled Aunt Hattie comfortably on the sofa and then was about to leave when she heard a distinct meow coming from the other room. She went into the bedchamber to investigate, and the sound grew louder. It was coming from a valise. She opened it at once, and a large cat jumped out at her.

“You must be Arnold!” She laughed as the cat went into the sitting room and curled up on Aunt Hattie, who was already asleep.

She could only shake her head. “What a good thing it is that the proprieties are being observed,” she muttered sarcastically.



Chapter Sixteen

Jack and Philip made their way to the Albany, where Feathers had rooms.

"I hope he will answer the door to us and explain what this business is all about," Jack remarked.

"Indeed, that would be pleasant for a change, instead of finding our suspect dead and having to ferret information out of others," Philip reflected.

"It would be boring, is what it would be," Jack retorted.

They reached the door, and there was no answer to their summons. Jack made quick work of the lock with his knife and the door opened into an unexpected sight.

"This is disappointing," Jack said as he looked around at an almost sterile room.

"It does not look as if anyone lives here," Philip observed. "Do you think the killer was here before us and was seized by some strange compulsion to put everything in order?"

"It is very odd, but Newsom is a general and most generals are tidy."

"Most generals have a servant to tidy for them."

Jack shrugged. "I suppose we should still look around, though I doubt we will find anything."

"Nor do I," Philip agreed.

Jack wandered around the sitting room and into the bedchamber. "It looks as though he did not plan on returning."

"Perhaps he was expecting a large payment and then to leave the country?"

"I daresay we will never know," Jack called from the bedchamber, busy searching every pocket of the few pieces of clothing remaining. "One thing I can say with certainty is that not for a king's ransom would I want to wear such clothing as this. There are pairs of bright green and yellow pantaloons as well as spotted and peacock waistcoats..."

Philip made a noise of disgust. Jack heard him opening drawers and

cupboard doors of the meager furniture as he searched them. "Nothing in here." He came into the bed chamber. "Any luck in here?"

"Just some old receipts in one or two pockets."

"Here, I will look through them while you finish searching." He held his hand and took them from Jack, who moved onto searching the tables on either side of the bed and then under the mattress. After that he rolled up the carpet and checked each of the floorboards.

"How is Aunt Hattie's chaperonage succeeding?" Philip asked sardonically.

"She is perfectly amiable. Please convey my thanks to your mother."

Philip laughed. "I think my mother has ulterior motives."

"Aye, along with every married female across the kingdom."

"If word gets out who your chaperone is, there will be hell to pay."

Jack rose from the floor and dusted his breeches. "You know, I have never understood why all these old ladies, who I have never met, would care."

"They have nothing else to do," Philip replied, studying one piece of paper in particular.

"What have you there?" Jack asked.

"A bank transaction, but I cannot make out much of it."

"At least that is something. I do not think there is anything else here to find."

"It does not appear so. We can stop at the bank on the way back to my house. I wanted to meet with Sheldon one last time before we make our report."

Jack looked at him in confusion.

"I sent him with Knight to search the warehouse. Time is short."

"It also saves us a trip," Jack agreed.

They found their mounts and rode into the City. It took quite a bit of coaxing, even after showing their credentials, and quite a bit of coin to convince the manager to admit Mr. Feathers had accounts with that particular bank.

Jack hated to divulge the information, but it appeared necessary. "Mr. Feathers has met with an unfortunate end. We were investigating him for possible criminal activity."

"He is dead, you say?"

"It appears that way," Philip confirmed.

"Then I suppose there is no harm. Of late, Mr. Feathers had become quite a customer but recently he made a very large withdrawal. He does still have a safe deposit box with us, however."

Jack nodded. "If we could see inside the box, please?"

"Come this way." The gentleman pulled a set of keys from his waistband and took them through several sets of doors before reaching an inner room lined with boxes. He pulled one from a shelf and then unlocked it with a key he retrieved from a row inside the inner room.

"Ring the bell if you need anything and someone will attend you," the manager said before leaving them alone.

"I am afraid to hope," Philip said as he lifted the metal lid.

"Is it empty?" Jack asked, trying to peer inside.

He opened the box wider, and looked closer. "Actually no, but there is only a key."

"A key?" Jack asked, his heart sinking. "I do not suppose it has any sort of identification on it?"

Philip held up a small iron key that was as plain and unidentifiable as any he had ever seen.

"Should we return to his rooms and give it a try?"

"I found nothing whatsoever in those rooms that it would have opened."

"Nor did I," Jack admitted, running a frustrated hand through his hair. "Perhaps it will open a money-box at another bank?"

"Perhaps," Philip agreed, "but we will find ourselves on a wild goose chase."

"I think we should take it. You never know what we may come upon."

They left the bank and headed to Whitehall. "What shall we say?" Jack asked.

"I think we should say as much as possible, omitting the facts that Kate was the one who overheard what happened in the garden and that we suspect Newsom."

"And Lloyd," Jack pointed out.

"And Lloyd," Philip concurred.

"We have less than two days to discover what this is all about."

"I hope Sheldon and Knight found something at the warehouse."

"I had almost forgotten about the warehouse," Jack said. "It would be helpful if they have found a keyhole needing a key."

"No one is as lucky as that," Philip retorted.

They entered Whitehall and wound through the maze of halls and doorways until they reached the meeting room. They were the last to arrive, and Jack had to work extra hard to keep his face impassive. He was quite willing to wring Newsom's neck there and then. However,

without more proof, Jack would be the one who was drawn and quartered if he took such action at this point. He had to behave as though it was a normal day.

“Good morning, sirs,” Philip said as they entered the room.

“Be seated, gentlemen,” Wellington said. “Knight was just explaining about a warehouse his enquiries had led him to.”

Jack immediately began to panic. Was Knight going to let the cat out of the bag?

He chastised himself for jumping to conclusions. *Wait!*

“Indeed. We followed a group of men who had been seen behaving suspiciously in the Park, to a dockside warehouse in Wapping. We went back this morning to investigate and found crates and crates of explosives. However, they appear to be fireworks.”

“Fireworks?” Philip asked.

“Indeed,” Knight replied with a poignant look back at Philip that only Jack could see.

“Part of the victory celebrations, no doubt,” Newsom interjected dismissively. “You are barking up two different trees, I tell you.”

“Perhaps,” Wellington admitted, rubbing his furrowed brow. “I cannot like it. Rumors always have some grain of truth in them, though I suppose the papers being returned and someone overhearing conversations about fireworks and mistaking them for explosives is possible. Still, we must explore every option. It would be a blessing if all of this was a mistake, but we must be certain.”

“We will continue to watch the warehouse and its contents,” Knight volunteered.

“And we will be ready at the Park.”

“Very well. Report individually to me tomorrow,” Wellington said. “Newsom has another meeting. There are fewer than two days now,” Wellington reminded them, as if they could have forgotten. “Dismissed.”

Newsom left and Lloyd followed. The other three remained. Rising from his seat, Knight walked across and closed the door.

“Very well. What are you not telling me?” Wellington asked.

“There were definitely explosives intermixed with the fireworks. I thought it best not to divulge that information.”

Wellington allowed an expletive to escape.

“They are being removed as we speak,” Knight reassured him.

Philip explained what they had overheard and their suspicions about Feathers’ death, followed by what they had found that morning.

“A single, bloody key?” Wellington asked.

"Indeed," Jack said, pulling the key from his pocket and handing it to his commander.

"I will be happy to return to the Continent," the duke murmured as he fingered and inspected the key. "This could belong to any lock in the country—or all of Europe, for that matter." He handed it back to Jack. "Do not waste extra time on it. Remember probabilities and tactical decisions. That is not likely to bear fruit."

"Yes, sir." Jack agreed wholeheartedly.

"I will take it upon myself to look deeper into Worth and Newsom. I am well acquainted with someone who would know, and I can ask the questions without drawing undue attention as to why," Wellington said. Standing up, he went to the door. "I will let you know what I find. We still need proof." He was gone before Philip or Jack could leave their chairs.

They gathered their hats, gloves and swords and did not speak again until they were safely out of the building.

"Where to next?" Philip asked.

"To see how my ward does. I have a feeling she is not lying abed as a proper invalid should."

Philip laughed. "I do not envy you. She is lovely, but no simpering miss."

"Were that the case, she would not be so interesting."



Kate was not lying abed. Having decided her arm would throb and hurt no matter where she was, she first made certain Aunt Hattie was happy and looked after, and then sent a note to Maria to ask if she could call. Being at her guardian's house felt safe and secure, but it would not enable to her to be of help in the investigations. The celebrations were now less than two days away. Kate had never really thought about patriotism—although, of course, she cared for her country—but it was becoming more and more important to her. It was something she had taken for granted. However, there were things that women could do to help on occasion, and her arm would mend in time, whether or not she kept to her bed.

Maria sent back word that, of course, Kate was welcome.

Kate and Simpson were soon on their way to Mottram Place, Kate wearing one of her older, more subdued grey gowns because none of her newer day dresses would fit over her splint.

“Good morning, Miss Rafferty,” Major Lloyd said, stepping out from the study and greeting her as she was shown in by the butler.

“Good morning, Major,” she returned, wondering how she could use this chance meeting to her advantage. After all, it was a good part of the reason she had wished to call.

“Are you waiting for Maria or should I send for her?” he asked.

“She is expecting me,” Kate answered, hastily trying to think of what to ask.

“Send for Maria and some tea,” he ordered the butler before showing her into the drawing room, assisting her to an elegant armchair and then joining her on the nearby sofa. “How is your arm?”

“It is quite broken,” she returned playfully, “but it will mend.”

“You are quite unlike any lady of my acquaintance, Miss Rafferty.”

“I imagine you have met many interesting ladies in your travels, Major. Are they all delicate like our English roses?”

“No,” he admitted. “You are in the right of it. I should not insult your gender so.” He had a look in his eyes that made Kate wonder what he was really about. She did not thank him evil, but perhaps that was why he was good at it.

“Is he filling your head with tales of war?” Maria asked pleasantly as she came into the room. “Good morning, Kate.”

“Good morning, Maria.”

“I would not bore Miss Rafferty so, Sister,” Lloyd replied. Standing up, he kissed her lightly on the cheek.

“Are you away on business, or would you care to join us for a walk or a drive?”

“Business, of course, but might I suggest a drive? Your friend is very brave, but having had a similar injury myself, I do not recommend excessive amounts of exercise.” He gave Kate a conspiratorial wink, which surprised her. She would not have thought him capable of such lightheartedness. But just as quickly, the look was gone and replaced with a more pensive one. Regret, perhaps? Before she could fully determine the truth behind the change, he bowed and left them.

“What would you like to do today, Kate?”

“I think perhaps he is correct that the drive would be preferable. While I do not wish to be in bed, it does not mean my arm is comfortable.”

Maria shook her head. “Let me fetch my bonnet and call for the phaeton. I think I have a fancy to drive myself.”

“How very dashing of you!” Kate teased.

Soon, a sporting vehicle of polished black with a gold trim, pulled by two sleek, dapple-grey blood horses and held by a tiger, was waiting in front of the house.

“Are you certain you know how to drive this?” Kate asked, remembering such a scene with Jack. “I do not care for any more broken bones at the moment.”

“Oh, yes. Gabriel has taught me well.”

Still feeling apprehensive, Kate climbed into the vehicle while Maria got in on the other side. In a matter of moments, Maria was handling the ribbons with an air of assurance as she steered the greys through the unpredictable traffic. While not as skilled as Captain Owens, she was evidently quite competent.

“Where shall we go?”

“For a turn around the Park, perhaps? This may sound silly, but I wish to do something to help my guardian.”

Maria looked at her for a moment before returning her attention to driving. “What do you think we may discover?”

“Perhaps we may see something. I wish I knew what to be looking for, but who would suspect two young ladies of anything other than their pleasure?”

“I suppose you are correct,” she answered doubtfully.

Kate looked about her on the beautiful morning, on the sunshine brightening drab roofs and smoke-blackened stone, and it felt as though she was imagining things. The world could not possibly be so dark as recent events suggested. When she considered what had happened to her – what had happened the night before – she felt very afraid.

“Is that not your father over there, speaking with Lord Worth?” she asked, to dispel the sense of alarm.

Maria looked up, following Kate’s pointing finger to a bridge, and squinted. “Yes, I believe so. That is Lord Bathurst with them. Shall we go closer?”

“Is there a way to do so subtly?” Kate asked.

“I very much doubt it, but we can certainly try.” She slowed the horses, then pulled them to a stop. The tiger jumped down and went to the horses’ heads. Maria began to climb down, so Kate gathered her skirts and also descended from the vehicle. “Walk the horses,” Maria instructed the tiger. “We will take a short stroll.”

The tiger did as directed, and taking Kate’s uninjured arm, Maria began to walk in the direction of the three gentlemen.

“I very much doubt we can walk directly by without interrupting

their conversation,” Kate said, wondering what Maria was doing.

“We shall walk that way,” Maria answered, pointing to a small fork in the path that led toward a bridge. “I am counting on their being engrossed in conversation and not noticing us. As long as we do not draw attention to ourselves, we should be able to overhear what is said quite nicely.”

Kate smiled at her friend, who seemed very proud of her investigative skills, and hoped they found something out – while at the same time fearing that her friend would overhear something she should not.

Kate was dumbfounded to see a small alcove beneath the stone bridge, which she and Maria managed to reach unobserved by her friend’s father, by keeping their heads down and remaining quiet.

“He wants to ride in on his horse,” Lord Bathurst said. “He thinks it will look more official.”

“He likes to think he is a soldier,” Lord Mottram said.

“He will have to be content with being the Commander-in-Chief,” Bathurst replied dryly.

“You do not foresee a problem with the boats on the Serpentine and the fireworks behind?” Mottram asked.

“He will be surrounded by soldiers, your son included.”

“Who are they talking about?” Maria leaned over to whisper.

“I think they are speaking about the Prince Regent,” Kate answered, trying to continue listening. She did not see how anything she had overheard thus far would help. To have three powerful lords involved in such a scheme would be disastrous. That was a calamitous state of affairs even to her own unknowing self.

“The Prince Regent will be alongside the Duke of York, the King of Prussia, the Czar and General Blucher, Lord Beresford and Hill,” Bathurst continued. “Knight, Owens, Everleigh and Lloyd will protect him from the rear.”

“That leaves the entire front,” Worth added.

“He understands the risks, but says the celebrations must go on,” Bathurst stated.

“Explosives were found, I understand?” Mottram asked.

Maria let a gasp escape.

“It was all a mistake. My sources say that those were necessary for some of the firework displays,” Worth explained.

“Then I expect we have done all that we can do,” Bathurst said.

“Tomorrow is the day and we will keep a watch posted here. We are

adding twenty more soldiers as we speak. For the nonce, I must be away to a meeting with Wellington.”

“And I must meet my brother at the club for lunch. Care to join us, Mottram?”

“No, thank you,” Mottram replied and they could be heard walking away across the bridge.

“I think it is safe to leave now,” Maria said. “Even if we see Father, we have merely been out for a walk.”

“Yes,” Kate consented, disappointed that nothing helpful had been overheard.

They came out from their refuge and were attempting to look unobtrusive, as though admiring the ducks, when Lord Mottram came down the bridge toward them. “Maria, is that you?”

“Papa! Yes, as you see. Kate needed to take some air.”

“It is a pleasant day for it,” he said distractedly, inclining his head to greet her. “You are healing well, I trust, Miss Rafferty?”

“Yes, thank you.” His eyes were scanning the area around them, but Kate could not detect he was looking at any person in particular.

“Where are you off to now, Papa?” Maria asked.

“Lunch at my club. May I escort you somewhere?”

“No, we have the phaeton. I expect I will see you later, then.”

Lord Mottram inclined his head and turned his steps in the direction of Hyde Park Corner and Piccadilly.

Kate could not suppress the sigh of frustration she felt.

“I take it you did not discover what you wished?” Maria asked.

“No, nothing of any particular efficacy.”

They had started to walk along beside the water, back toward where they had left the tiger walking the curricule. when Maria suddenly spied something in the reeds and began to scream.



Chapter Seventeen

Wethersby ushered Miss Rafferty and Lady Maria into the study. They were visibly shaken. Jack immediately rushed over and helped them to be seated.

“What has happened?”

“We found a dead body!” Lady Maria cried. “It was, was...” She began to sob uncontrollably.

He looked at Kate. “Start from the beginning, if you please.”

She swallowed before speaking. “We went for a drive in the park and decided to get down and walk along by the Serpentine.”

“Go on,” he prompted.

“We stopped at the bridge for a rest,” she said, and he noticed her gaze fall. Was she hiding something? “We had been there but a few moments when Maria noticed some brightly colored clothing floating in the water. It was hidden by the reeds.”

“Then I screamed and my father came rushing back.” Lady Maria looked close to hysteria as she spoke. Her hands were shaking and her eyes were dull. She appeared stunned.

“We saw Lord Mottram speaking with Lord Worth and Lord Bathurst on the bridge. He had just left us to go to the club for lunch when Maria espied something colorful in the weeds,” Kate explained.

Jack nodded, trying to piece together the story. “Did you happen to notice anything else about the body?”

“It was horrible!” Maria wailed. “I wish I could erase the picture from my mind. It will haunt me forever.”

Jack imagined it must have been grotesque. He had seen bodies before that had been in the water for some time.

“I did recognize one thing of import,” Kate said quietly when Maria had composed herself.

Jack looked up and waited for her to speak.

“They were the same clothes Mr. Feathers was wearing the night I last saw him.”

"'Twas as suspected, then. Do we need to escort Lady Maria home?"

"I thought it best to bring her here, since Lord Mottram was dealing with the corpse."

Jack needed to know where the body had been taken. He mentally cursed, hoping any evidence would not be lost before he had a chance to search the remains.

"I think I will take Maria upstairs to lie down, if you do not mind."

"Not at all. I must go out and attend to a few things. Let Wethersby know if you need me and he will find me for you."

She nodded before leading Lady Maria upstairs.

Jack gathered his hat, gloves and sword and left to find Philip. They must act at once. He finally ran Philip to earth at the Guard's Club. "I have been looking all over for you."

"I apologize. I did not mean to tarry here so long, but I was following information about Jennings."

"Any luck there?"

"No. He does not wish to be found, therefore he will not be. What did you find?" he asked as he gathered his belongings and they went outside.

"Miss Rafferty and Lady Maria found a body in the Serpentine this morning. Miss Rafferty believes it is Mr. Feathers. She told me his face was unrecognizable but the clothing was the same as that the man was wearing when last she saw him, at the ball. Lord Mottram was nearby and heard Lady Maria scream and is, at present, dealing with the corpse. I want to search the body before we miss the chance. With his lordship being Lloyd's father, we cannot be too cautious."

"I will send a note to Sheldon. It will save us a great deal of time searching if Feathers was not taken to the mortuary."

Jack waited while they returned to the club and Philip dispatched a note to his father's man, then they set off again.

"Do you think Mottram contacted Bow Street?" Jack asked.

"It is the most likely outcome. Who else would he inform?"

"I have no idea. Bow Street would be my choice."

"Then let us begin there."

They went on foot since it was only a few streets away. As they walked, Jack could not help but wonder aloud, "Why throw him in the Serpentine? It is hardly a discreet way to dispose of a body."

"So that he would be found. It has all the appearance of another warning. But to whom?" Philip added, which made Jack sick with foreboding.

When they arrived at the offices of the Bow Street Runners, they were greeted by a young clerk who did not yet have a beard.

"How may I help you, sirs?"

"We understand there was a dead body found in the Park. We would like to speak with the person who attended to it," Jack answered.

The young man looked confused. "When was this, sir?"

"Just this morning; not as much as two hours ago," Jack answered, checking his gold pocket watch.

"Forgive me, sir, but I have been on duty the whole morning and have heard nothing of this matter. If you will be good enough to wait a moment, I will ask some of the officers upstairs."

"We would be much obliged," Philip replied.

After the young man had left on his errand, Jack cursed under his breath.

"It was Mottram, you say?" Philip began.

"Yes. Do you think it a coincidence that the authorities have no knowledge of this?"

"It depends on whether or not Mottram considers himself an authority."

"Most would not wish to sully their hands—"

"Unless they had a reason to," Philip finished.

The clerk returned before they could explore the thought further. He shook his head. "I am afraid there have been no suspicious deaths reported and I checked with Mr. Stafford himself. However, if you should wish to ascertain if anyone was brought into the dead-house, here is the address. Sometimes vagabonds are not reported and are donated there for...science."

"Thank you," Philip said, taking the sheet of paper.

"A vagabond in a fop's clothing? I think not," Jack drawled as they left the building.

They went to the address provided by the young clerk. It was a small, inconspicuous building, hidden in a dark alley with its profession marked in small letters. It was menacing even in the daylight.

"I am glad I am not alone on this task," Jack confessed as he knocked on the door. There was no answer after several minutes, so he tried the handle and it opened. "What do you say?"

Philip raised his brows before stepping over the threshold. It took a moment for Jack's eyes to adjust to the dim lighting. "It gets better and better," he murmured.

"Is anyone here?" Philip called.

An odd-looking older gentleman, with disheveled grey hair and a humped back, shuffled out from another room wearing gloves and a thick apron. "Eh?" he enquired.

"I am Captain Everleigh and this is Captain Owens. We were told a body was found in the Serpentine River a couple of hours ago. We were wondering if it had been brought here."

"This is where bodies are brought," he said in a surly tone.

"He was wearing bright clothing," Jack suggested.

The man shook his head. "They do not have clothes on by the time I see them."

Jack closed his eyes for a moment to keep from losing his temper.

"Might we take a look at the most recent corpses?" Philip asked. "It is of great import to the Crown."

"Suit yourself," the man said as he turned around and shuffled back from whence he came.

The odor that met them when they entered the dark, cold room was almost as jarring as the one met after a battle, but they had one thing in common – death. It was not easy for Jack to control the bile in his stomach.

As if the man read Jack's mind, he muttered, "Breathe through your mouth," along with some other choice words as he went to the first body in a long row of them and pulled back the sheet, continuing one by one. The first was a female, her face destroyed by signs of syphilis. The man quickly replaced the sheet and went to the next; the body was male but clearly not a gentleman by the leathery skin and matted hair. Most of the bodies appeared to have lived a difficult life, which was apparent by their hygiene. Lack of teeth, dirty nails and skin often scarred and calloused. When they saw the next body, there was no comparison nor any doubt that it was Feathers. Even in death his nails were cleaned and well-manicured, his skin unmarred by work.

"This is he," Jack said.

"Knock to the head," the man explained before he gave another grunt and left them alone.

"I do not suppose we should bother asking for his effects," Philip remarked dryly. Anything of value found on an unclaimed body would have been pilfered long ago.

"Excuse me—" Jack called back to the man then turned to Philip and shrugged. "It is worth a try."

He turned back again and waited.

"I do not suppose—is there any possibility his belongings are still

here?"

The man pointed to a bin beneath the table the body was on.

There, the soaked, dirty pieces of Feather's flamingo pink trousers and bright turquoise waistcoat were wadded up.

"No boots," Philip pointed out.

"Nor watch or pocketbook," Jack verified as he checked the pockets. "Only a receipt from a silk warehouse in Cheapside." He tossed the water-soaked paper to Philip. "At least we made sure." He threw the items back into the bin and looked once more at the body, wishing it could speak and tell him what they needed to know.



Lady Mottram had come when she had heard the news, and taken Maria home. Kate had been frantically pacing up and down the drawing room ever since.

It seemed as though her guardian had been gone forever, and seeing the evidence of Mr. Feathers' body had shaken her. Before, it had been but a possibility and thus hazy knowledge; now, the reality had thoroughly shaken her.

When, at last, the front door opened, she ran into the entrance hall and threw her arms about him.

"Has something else happened?" he asked with concern.

"No, forgive me." She made to pull out of his arms when she realized how forward she had been, but he held her there.

"What has upset you so?"

"Nothing new. I have been indulging a severe fit of the fidgets, I fear, for your safety and mine."

He pulled her closer and held her against his chest. She closed her eyes and reveled in the sense of safety and security from the feel of his heart, beating through his chest against her cheek. What would it be like always to have this? To have another to lean on?

She pulled back and looked up into his face. He was watching her, his gaze burning through her. What did it mean?

"I should not do this," he murmured, an instant before he bent his head and kissed her.

It was such a strange sensation that Kate felt lost. It was firm, yet tender and soft, and a warm tingling spread through her body. She did not know what she was supposed to do, so she pressed her lips back to his, even as his hand came up and gently caressed the side of her face.

He pulled back and pressed his forehead to hers.

“Why did you do that?” she asked stupidly, while also wishing he would do it again.

“I am an idiot, that is why,” he admitted as he pulled away and walked to the window, “but you are a devilishly pretty lady and I am attracted to you.”

“Is that such a dreadful thing?” she asked.

“For you, it is. You know my situation, Kate. I am in no position to marry.”

She could not help but laugh derisively—perhaps to disguise the embarrassment and hurt she felt.

“And why is that funny?” He turned and looked at her, his brows lifted in disbelief.

“I think you are making excuses. Marrying me would solve your financial difficulties.”

“I will not marry you for your money, Kate.”

“Then you are prideful as well as an idiot,” she retorted, rushing from the room.

“Kate!” he shouted, but she had already reached the top of the staircase and did not turn back. Closing her door, she turned the lock, and then did not know what to do. She wanted to scream; she wanted to cry, but most of all, she wanted to hide.

She crawled up on the sofa by the window and Arnold leaped into her lap. “Well, how do you do, kitty?”

He purred in response and angled his head as she scratched behind his ears.

“I envy you, Arnold. Our needs are not so very different, are they? A warm bed, food to eat, and companionship. Perhaps I shall get a cat and retire to the country, after all,” she told him, adding reflectively, “At least I was useful there.” Then she threw her head back in disgust. “Pity becomes no one. But how am I to endure this for five more months?”

There was a knock on the door and Kate stilled in place. Arnold protested by butting his head against her hand.

“Kate, I know you are in there. May we talk?”

She did not respond. She had nothing to say.

“Please, Kate. At least let me apologize. I am the worst sort of blackguard for kissing you.”

You would not need to apologize if you had intended it honorably, she thought bitterly.

She heard him growling with frustration, followed by a thump

against the door. "Kate," he said mournfully, "I must go out again. Will you at least assure me that you are well?"

She bit her lip, determined not to speak before she was ready. The kiss had unleashed feelings inside which confused her, and produced an acute sense of longing for that which now seemed unattainable.

A few moments later, she heard him descend the stairs, followed by the front door closing and breathed a sigh of relief for the temporary reprieve.

"Come, Arnold. I shall return you to Aunt Hattie, for I must go and seek Maria's advice—if she has recovered her wits, that is. You have been a most excellent companion."

Aunt Hattie was resting and Arnold quickly took his place beside her. "Fickle creature," Kate muttered with amusement.

She called for Simpson, donned a spencer, and having gathered her gloves and tied on her bonnet, was soon walking with her maid to Mottram Place.

"Good afternoon, Miss Rafferty," Hendricks greeted her.

"Is Lady Maria at home?"

"In the general way, miss, she is not at home, but I suspect she will see you," he said in a conspiratorial tone.

Kate gave a nod of understanding. "I will show myself up."

Maria was resting on a chaise in the sitting room, and started when Kate knocked on the open door.

"Kate! What brings you here? Not that I am not relieved to see you."

Closing the door behind her, Kate went and sat beside her friend.

"Have you discovered something?"

She shook her head. "Only that I am a fool."

"That I will not believe. What has happened?"

"Captain Owens kissed me and then proceeded to tell me how we could not marry."

"The scoundrel!"

Kate sighed heavily. "Yes, indeed I thought the same. However, on reflection, I think he is attempting to be honorable in his own way, although I cannot help but feel I am somehow unworthy of his affection."

"Nonsense! You, unworthy? Do not be a goose!"

Kate was touched by her friend's vehement defense. She smiled half-heartedly.

"What can we do? You can hardly continue under the same roof with him."

“Yes, I must. He decreed it so.”

“No, you must return here.”

“I will consider it. Are you feeling better?” Kate changed the subject.

Maria stood up and went to the bell-pull. When a servant arrived in response, she requested tea and cakes.

“I will be well enough as long as I do not think overly much about it. I still cannot believe Mr. Feathers is dead! I did not like him, but I did not wish him ill.”

“Nor I,” Kate agreed.

Maria sat back down beside her when the servant entered with a tray. After pouring them each some tea, a devious look entered Maria’s eye. “Will you at least tell me what it was like?”

“What what was like?” Kate asked after she had chewed a delicious bite of an almond cake.

“The kiss, of course. He looks like he would kiss well, if I might say so.”

“You should not.” Kate pressed her palms to her forehead and shook her head. “What I do not understand is why would he do so?”

“Oh, Kate! Surely you understand that men do all sorts of things without requiring to feel affection?”

“That is abhorrent!” she replied. “You are saying he kissed me because of some odd male fancy?”

Maria sighed. “I am afraid it is possible. I cannot speak for his intentions.”

“No, of course not.” Kate took another bite of cake, allowing the indulgence of sweet food to soothe her. It could be but a temporary reprieve.

“All things considered, I should still like to be kissed someday,” Maria said thoughtfully.

“You have never had the experience?” Kate asked.

“No. There has been no one as yet who I could hold in such affection. I am certain it is a flaw in my character.”

“Even though many have sought your hand?”

Maria gave her a look of disbelief. “You have seen the fish in the sea. None are remotely appetizing.”

Kate laughed at her friend’s humor, yet suspected she would very much desire a kiss from Lord Philip. “I can say that it was unexpected. It was more than just a meeting of the lips.”

“Whatever can you mean?” Maria leaned forward eagerly. “Do tell!”

“I felt strange sensations inside. I cannot explain it.”

"Try!" her friend insisted, looking aggrieved.

Kate concentrated. "There are no words! It was a rush of feeling, akin to going around a sharp turn too fast or the sudden drop I used to feel in my stomach before jumping down from a tree."

"All of this from a simple kiss?" Maria looked entranced.

"Indeed. That is why I said I could not describe it. At the same time your mind is a whirl of thoughts as you wonder if you are doing it correctly. 'Do I like the sensation?' your mind asks. 'What does it mean?'"

"And then he had the audacity to say he could not marry you? I cannot believe it!"

"He did apologize."

Maria snorted. "Of course, he did."

"And then he said he would not marry me for my money. For the most part, I am sad because I enjoy his company. I did not think it would be possible to enjoy such friendship with a gentleman."

"I suppose that is one benefit of having a brother—not that we spend a great deal of time with one another. He was very disturbed by the news of Mr. Feathers' death," Maria added.

"I did not realize they had such a close friendship."

"Nor did I, but he was quite shocked; first he stared in disbelief, then he cursed, and then he rushed out of the house."

Kate finished her tea. "What should I do now, Maria? I cannot return and pretend that nothing has happened."

Maria sat up, as though she had had a clever idea. "But perhaps that is exactly what you should do."

"Why would I do such a thing?"

"I assure you, it will drive him to distraction. I have seen it before. He must think he has your affections now and that he is toying with them. If you ignore what happened it will pique his curiosity and make him want you more."

"What a wretched game this is!"

"Quite."

"And why would I want to play a game to capture the affections of someone who does not realize my worth from the beginning?" Kate demanded.

"Because, while gentlemen are intelligent at many things, love is not one of them."

"You are a fount of wisdom, Maria."

"Unfortunately, if I am, it has been of little benefit to me!" she

bemoaned.



Chapter Eighteen

Today was the day of the victory celebrations in Hyde Park and as far as Jack was concerned, there had been no conclusion to any part of the affair. The documents may have been returned, and the explosives might have been confiscated, but that was no guarantee that there would not be more explosives to replace the ones lost or that the documents had only been lost amongst Whitehall and not copied and passed on.

All of that weighed upon his consideration on top of his colossal mistake with Kate. She had managed to keep herself from him since then, and it felt as though a huge weight was bearing down upon his conscience. He had scarcely slept since because of the guilt and the thoughts about her which would not cease to whirl around in his head. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever met and, besides, she was in every way his intellectual equal. He had not thought to enjoy a woman's company so much and he felt the loss of her friendship acutely.

What would it be like to be married to her? To settle down at Winterbourne and raise a family? He groaned at the thought, but perhaps, without his grandmother's venom there to poison it, it might be a better place. He had never allowed himself even to consider marriage and living at the estate an option. With Kate by his side, it might be very pleasant indeed. However, he loved his life in the army, carrying out secret commissions for his country. The danger was a thrill and the rewards innumerable.

Jack rolled over in his bed and punched the pillow. He could not ask Kate to deal with such a life. It was the antithesis of elegant. It was often primitive, dirty and grueling, even for an officer's wife. Kate was full of pluck and would no doubt handle it, but would she enjoy it? Would their being together be enough?

He still could not believe that she would want him. She had all but offered marriage—but would she feel differently now? He had been a cur of the highest order. It would certainly be better for her to find someone stable and secure...and, apparently, with more feeling.

But first, he had to see her again and do his best to repair the damage he had caused.

He dressed for the day, remembering he and the others were to be knighted. He closed his eyes and shook his head. "Of all the ridiculous notions," he muttered to himself.

"Has Miss Rafferty been down this morning?" Jack asked Wethersby, not liking the feeling of acute disappointment he experienced when she was not there.

"I have not seen her at all since yesterday morning... sir," Weathersby remarked somewhat scornfully, as though he knew they had had a disagreement and Jack was now in the suds.

"Will you please check with her maid that Miss Rafferty is in good health and spirits?"

Weathersby bowed and left on the errand.

Jack ate his toast and eggs without tasting them, feeling more and more unsettled.

Weathersby returned. "Simpson says she accompanied Miss Rafferty to visit Lady Maria yesterday afternoon and then was sent home after Miss Rafferty decided to stay there for the night."

"That is very odd," Jack said. "Why would she send Simpson home?"

"I could not venture to say," Weathersby replied with a sniff.

Jack muttered a curse and then gathered his things to leave, passing Aunt Hattie wandering in the entrance hall.

"Good morning," he said.

She smiled distantly. "Who are you?"

"Captain Owens, a friend of Lord Philip. Are you going to break your fast?"

"That would be lovely."

He really ought to take her back to Everleigh House with him, he reflected, but she seemed content enough to be there, and he was in a hurry. He seated her at the table and the footman stepped forward to attend her.

He rode to Everleigh House to travel to the Palace with Philip. Once today was over, he would devote himself to making things right between Kate and himself. He still did not know how that would happen, but he could not leave again with this contention between them.

The ceremony was as mundane and extravagant as he would have imagined. When the time came for the four of them to be knighted, he stepped forward and knelt on the stool. After the Prince Regent had

performed the accolade with the sword, Jack stood, bowed, and walked away. At least that was over with, he thought with relief. He looked out into the gathering to see where Kate was, but she was nowhere to be found. He frowned. She was hardly inconspicuous. Had she chosen not to come?

Next, he looked for Lady Maria and Lady Mottram and found them in the crowd with Lord Mottram. Of course, they would be there to see Major Lloyd's appointment to the Knighthood.

It would seem that Kate had deliberately chosen not to come. He stood waiting for the ceremony to end, trying to convince himself it did not matter. Females were a distraction. He should be concentrating on this momentous occasion, and also on being alert to protect his future sovereign, not worrying about his beautiful ward and her whereabouts. If only he could go back to the days when he had had no one else to worry about, when he would simply have been thinking about how ridiculous all the lords looked in their wigs!

When at last the ceremony ended, he found himself walking toward Lady Maria.

"Good afternoon." He made her a leg.

She greeted him coolly with the slight inclination of her head and none of the usual friendliness.

"Might I inquire after my ward? I understand she stayed at Mottram Place last evening."

Lady Maria's face turned from disdain to concern. "But no, sir, she did not. She did come to visit, yes, but she left after tea."

Jack's blood turned to ice. "She sent her maid back to my house, saying she was spending the night with you."

Lady Maria shook her head. "She did not. Kate would not have done that in any case."

"I thought it was unusual, myself, but I will admit I have little experience in such matters."

"And you are certain she did not return to your house last evening?" Maria asked.

"I did not visit her chambers personally, but her maid and Wethersby were quite certain."

Lady Maria went to a nearby chair and covered her mouth with her hand. "Something has happened to her. Kate would not run away without telling someone."

"Someone in your house had to have sent the maid away."

"It seems most likely," she agreed quietly. "I will return there at once

and try to discover who it was.”

“I believe it might be of more benefit to return to Half Moon Street and question Simpson first.”

“May I go with you?”

“I rode here.”

“Then I shall meet you there shortly.”

It was not a quick undertaking to excuse oneself from such a ceremony and retrieve one’s horse. It provided unwanted time for reflection. There were so many things he had done wrong that he could only blame himself. He had let down his guard when he should have been protecting her. But why, he conjectured, would the villains of the piece do something to Kate now?

He could not bear the thought of any more harm coming to her. What if a rescue proved to be too late?

Newsom and Worth had been at the ceremony, had they not? He was quite certain he had seen them there. Scattering street traders and pedestrians alike, he rode like the devil back to his house. Lady Maria arrived a few minutes after him. He sent Weathersby to direct Simpson to meet them in the drawing room.

She entered the room and curtsied. “You sent for me, sir?”

“Miss Rafferty did not stay with Lady Maria last night.”

The maid gasped in horror.

“We do not know that she has been harmed, but we need you to tell us everything. Who told you to return here?”

She shook her head at this news and frowned, clearly trying to remember. “I think it was one of the footmen. He was tall and handsome.”

“That is every footman in London,” Jack said with frustration.

“Can you remember his hair color or eye color?” Maria asked.

“Brown hair, I think. I do not remember his eyes. Dark, mayhap?”

“Try to think. Is there anything else you can remember about him?” Jack encouraged.

“I can question all of them if necessary,” Maria said.

“I would prefer not to if possible. Miss Rafferty will be safer if this is kept quiet.”

The maid began to cry and Jack struggled to be patient. He was panicking inside and at this juncture it was the worst mistake he could make. “Was he thin or of average build?”

“More on the thin side,” she said. “I think perhaps he might have had a scar on his chin.”

"Ah. I know which one he is," Maria said. "I will go and speak with him at once."

"I will accompany you. We have no time to lose."

As Jack and Lady Maria exited the drawing room to leave, Weathersby was closing the front door.

"This has just come for you, sir," the butler said, handing a note to Jack.

Miss Rafferty is safe. No harm will come to her.

"That is all it says?" Lady Maria asked in disbelief.

"Somehow I do not feel comforted."



Kate was terrified. If only she had not left the house in anger, she would still be safe. Now, Jack would not even know to look for her. She had no notion of where she might be. Her arms and feet were bound, her mouth gagged with cotton and her head ached like the devil. Jack's expression was very apt, no matter how unladylike. If only she could remember what had happened. At least whoever had kidnapped her had been kind enough not to bind where her arm was broken and placed her on a cot.

It was difficult to think and keep her wits. She blinked a few times, trying to allow her eyes to adjust in the darkness. There was a small crack of light over what appeared to be a door or window and there was a very strange odor that she could not put a name to. Perhaps some type of oil mixed with earthy damp.

Why would they do this to her?

Because you can identify the man, she acknowledged silently. It was a very deep game that was being played, in which she was merely a pawn—and dispensable.

Think, Kate, she chastised herself. She could not simply wait like a widegeon for her abductor to return and do what he would. At least she had not been killed outright, as Feathers had. She shuddered at the recollection of his battered body.

The last thing she remembered was having tea with Maria. She had sought Maria's counsel because Jack had kissed her. *Jack had kissed her.* A rogue tear escaped to trickle down her cheek, and Kate was angry that she cared. She was angry that she had allowed herself to have feelings for a gentleman who had no more sensitivity than a marble statue!

Such reflections would avail her nothing, she reminded herself. What

had happened after tea? She had said farewell to Maria, and the butler had shown her out, but Simpson had not left with her. Kate had left alone... and then she remembered being seized from behind. Try as hard as she could, there was nothing left in her memory after that.

Why did she remember nothing else? Had she been drugged? Had she been here—wherever she was—all night? She must have been, since there was a small amount of daylight coming in through the crack.

Would Jack even notice she was gone? Would he search for her?

Bound as she was, her movement was impeded. Nevertheless, Kate wriggled about in an effort to see where she was, but that only made her head spin with dizziness. She began to shiver with fear. Not knowing where she was, and if anybody would even miss her, was unnerving and filled her with dread.

A rattling noise startled her from her misery and her heart began to pound with anxiety for what was to come next. It was the unmistakable sound of a key turning in a lock and the door opened wide, nearly blinding Kate with sunlight. She shrank back, waiting for a blow or some other form of attack as footsteps thudded dully outside and a shadow then stepped into view.

“Please remain calm, Miss Rafferty. I will not harm you.”

“Major Lloyd?” she managed to query through the cotton in her mouth.

“Yes, ’tis I. I have brought you some food and will untie you if you will give me your pledge of parole.”

He untied the gag so she could speak more clearly.

“Why are you holding me here? What have I done to deserve this?”

“You were eavesdropping; you heard and saw too much.”

“You saw me?” she whispered.

“I am well-trained in such skills, but I was also alert for anything out of the ordinary.”

“I was only coming to fetch my book,” she explained.

“Nevertheless, I fear I must keep you out of the way until affairs are concluded.”

“Why are you doing this to your family?”

He scowled at her. “I am doing this *for* my family.” He slammed the tray of food down before her on a bench. “Do you give me your parole? I will release you tomorrow if you will agree to remain here and keep quiet for one more night.”

“Do I have a choice? Very well. Where am I?”

“Somewhere safe, which is enough for you to know.”

“How can I trust you when you tried to kill me in the Park?” she demanded.

“I was not responsible for your...mishap, but those who were would gladly see you dead.”

Kate shuddered involuntarily. “May I infer from that you are not the traitor?”

“I am doing my duty, Miss Rafferty. Dinner will be brought to you later.”

“Will you at least inform Captain Owens that I am safe?”

“I have already done.” He inclined his head and left, locking the door behind him. His footsteps echoed more and more distantly and she was left in a deafening silence.

She could be anywhere in England, but she doubted it. Major Lloyd would have to be present at the ceremony that very morning and the victory celebrations that evening, therefore she must be in Town. Yet where in London would be so quiet?

Her stomach rumbled, reminding her of the tray Major Lloyd had brought her, and she decided not to cut off her nose to be revenged on her face. He had furnished her with a selection of ham, cheese, bread, and even a carafe of tea, although it was cold.

Having refreshed herself a little, she decided to explore her surroundings, despite finding it difficult to stand up having had her legs bound overnight. Her senses were still somewhat fuddled, but steadied as she went. It seemed a small shed-like structure—perhaps an old tool-house or harness room? The walls, made of stone and impermeable, were covered in dirt and damp. She could not be sure of anything except it would be almost impossible to find her. There had to be thousands upon thousands of similar buildings in London and without her guardian and friends knowing she had been taken, or that she was missing, she would be imprisoned in this dismal hole until Major Lloyd decided to release her. Ignoring the dank, unpleasant smell of the pile of sacking, she slumped back down, quite dejected.

There were so many pieces of the puzzle that made little sense to her.

Firstly, Major Lloyd had been discussing the situation with General Newsom in the library, the night she had thought to read *Sense and Sensibility*. Both officers worked for the Government, so there could be more to their meeting than she was privy to. However, she was certain it had been Newsom who had murdered Feathers.

Why had Feathers been murdered? Was that not really the key to the

situation?

She must, inadvertently, have seen something or someone would not have tried to kill her and Major Lloyd would not be keeping her *out of the way*, to use his own words.

The first thing she had overheard was the discussion in the library. She closed her eyes and tried to recall what had been said. The matter of the stolen papers was all that came to her recollection.

She had also overheard what had been said to Feathers before he was killed, but that had not been informative, other than she knew who had committed the murder and that he had been displeased with Feathers.

Was there anything else? Would it matter if she solved the riddle? It would be too late for her to change the outcome.

If Major Lloyd was innocent, then why was he going to such lengths, unless he was protecting someone? Could that be the answer? She frowned. She disliked the thought very much. There could be no one other than his family he would jeopardize his good name to protect and Lord Mottram was the only person Kate was aware of who would need that kind of protection.

She tried to think back to her dealings with Maria's father, but they had been few. To her knowledge, he had not been present for any of the events concerning Feathers. No, she could think of nothing to implicate Lord Mottram, unless he was secretly involved.

Could the major be protecting General Newsom, then? But why would Lloyd risk his reputation in such a manner? Was that part of being a spy? Was Jack asked to do such things in the name of King and country? Kate could not believe it of him.

Her mind strayed back to Jack. She ought to be angry with him, but she could not be, not any longer. All she wanted was the chance to reconcile with him; to be friends again. Being at odds with him felt wrong and left a void she had not known existed.

Whatever happened – if she escaped from this horrid situation alive – she wanted everything to be right between them again.



Chapter Nineteen

“We must remain calm,” Lady Maria said.

Jack could not help but look at her with dismay.

“I am speaking to myself,” she responded.

“I am trying to decide where to begin. We must consider who would have done this. Since Mr. Feathers is dead, the other players are Newsom and Worth; and, unfortunately, I must also consider your brother.”

Lady Maria went pale and swallowed hard. “I cannot believe it of him. If he has taken Kate, there must be a very good reason. I know Gabriel is often difficult to fathom, but we grew up together and I trust his character.”

“I hope he proves your loyalty worthy. But consider, if the abductor were your brother, where might he have taken her? It could not be far since he was at the ceremony this morning.”

“I know where I would take her if I were he. Father keeps a house a short distance before Richmond, for his mistress. I happen to know it is currently empty,” Maria remarked. She had a slight twinkle in her eye despite the gravity of the situation.

“Remind me not to toy with you, Lady Maria. Would you mind showing me where this house is? I assume you also know the direction?”

“But of course,” she said, rising and fetching her bonnet from Wethersby.

“Will your parents not be concerned over your whereabouts?”

She waved her hand dismissively in the air. “They believe I am with Kate.”

Jack shook his head and followed Lady Maria. A smart phaeton was being walked up and down the street by a tiger.

“Excellent. My phaeton is here. Would you care to drive, or shall I?”

Jack could not even find the words to reply, but took the reins and followed her directions once they had left the city and were on the road to Richmond. He could only hope this was not a diversion of

monumental proportions which would lose them precious time, but he had no better suggestions to follow.

"'Tis about two more miles, now," she voiced once they were out in the open countryside. "Why would Gabriel do such a thing, Captain Owens?"

Jack sighed heavily. "I wish I could answer with confidence, Lady Maria. But there is a piece of this situation we did not divulge to you. Whilst Kate was staying with you, she went downstairs one evening to retrieve a book from the library and she overheard your brother in conversation with General Newsom, speaking about some papers that were stolen from the War Office."

"She said nothing of this!"

"She hoped she had misheard and did not wish to concern you. The next day she suffered her accident and then Mr. Feathers was killed." Jack looked up. He could see Lady Maria was trying to puzzle out the details in her mind.

"That was two or three days before we found his body," she finally remarked.

"Correct."

"What is the connection, sir? I understood this shocking business had come about because of an expected threat to the Prince at the celebrations tonight."

"My presumption, and I pray I am, at least, close to being correct, is that your brother purports to be working on the side of these scoundrels in order to catch them."

"Do you mean he is serving more than one side?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

"Then you had better tell me everything. If you are right, he has probably taken Kate somewhere to protect her."

"But from whom, and from what, I wonder?"

"Either General Newsom or one of those men you both saw in the Park."

"I cannot credit two of the ruffians we saw with such an act. It is my belief they have been hired merely to plant and light the fireworks or explosives."

"Do you know aught of the final member of the group? Could he be a danger to Kate?"

"I suspect you refer to a deserter called Jennings. It is possible he could be involved, but I believe either Worth or Newsom is the mastermind. We are almost certain Feathers was blackmailing them."

"Turn at the next lane, where the sign says Rose Cottage," Lady Maria interjected, pointing to a narrow track.

Wherever this house was, it was quite secluded, and he could see why she had immediately bethought herself of it.

"None of that explains why Gabriel would risk so much. He was Newsom's aide when he first purchased his commission," Lady Maria said, "but that would hardly inspire such blinding loyalty."

"Was he? I did not know of that," Jack admitted. That information had to be of import.

"Perhaps Gabriel discovered Newsom was doing something treasonous?"

"Feathers must have discovered the same information, whatever that might be, and was murdered for trying to blackmail Newsom with the knowledge. There must be proof of their dealings somewhere."

"Turn right where the hedgerow ends and follow the drive. The house will be at the end."

"Is there somewhere we might leave the carriage so we do not announce our arrival?"

"I confess I do not know the property terribly well. It used to belong to my grandmother and I have not been here since I was a child."

"Are there caretakers? I would not like to find myself being shot for trespassing," Jack said dryly.

"I would hope they might believe I am who I say I am," Lady Maria answered in a similar dry tone.

When the thatched cottage came into view, Jack halted the phaeton alongside a copse of chestnut trees and tied up the horses. He would need to find them some water before they returned to Town.

They walked toward the house, skirting the trees instead of walking across the open lawn. It was a quaint stone cottage with black painted timbers and a blackened roof showing signs of colonization by ivy which festooned one corner. Despite this invader, it looked well cared for, if abandoned.

"Are we not going to knock on the door?" Maria asked.

"I would prefer to walk around and survey both the building and any possible threat first, if you will."

"That is reasonable," she said.

"Why, thank you, my lady." He could see why Kate liked Lady Maria so much.

The property was not overly large. There was a gardener's shed at the back of the house and a small stable for one or two horses twenty

yards away.

"I do not think anyone is here," Lady Maria observed quietly. "Would you like me to go and knock on the door first? They might think it odd, but I am the daughter of the owner."

"I will go with you. It will perhaps appear less odd if you are accompanied."

"Tally ho!" Lady Maria marched forward and around the front of the house to the door. Stepping inside the tiny rose-covered porch, she knocked on the wood panel. There was no answer. Glancing at Jack, she shrugged in a masculine fashion and then tried to turn the handle. "Locked, of course. I believe we should try the kitchen door."

They waded back through the garden and found that door locked also. Jack knocked quite a lot harder than Lady Maria had, but still there was no movement within the house.

"Perhaps Papa turned off the caretakers."

Something rattled in one of the buildings behind them. "Did you hear that?" Jack demanded.

"I did," Lady Maria confirmed. "Is someone there?" she called.

The sound, like that of a door rattling, was coming from one of the other buildings. It grew louder and almost frantic.

"There must be an animal trapped inside."

Jack was already running. "Kate could be locked in there!" he shouted over his shoulder.

"Oh, gracious heavens!" She picked up her skirts and hastened after him.

In Jack's experience matters rarely turned out so easily, yet it was his fervent hope as he ran to the range of stone buildings. With Kate's safety at risk, he would far rather be lucky than the alternative.

Remarkably, Lady Maria was on his heels as he approached the shed where the rattling seemed to be coming from, and then they heard Kate calling to them.

"Kate! 'Tis Captain Owens and Maria!" Lady Maria tried the handle but it was evidently also locked. "Shall we break the door down?" She looked enquiringly at Jack.

"I would be glad to impress you with my abilities, but the key is hanging up there." He pointed to an iron key, suspended on a string from a hook just above the door.

"I confess I find that a little disappointing," she objected as Jack took the key and opened the door. "Why go to all the trouble of capturing her if she can be found and released thus easily?"

The door opened and Kate almost fell into Jack's arms.

"You are unharmed?" he asked, casting an anxious eye over her person. She was disheveled, but had no obvious injuries beyond her broken arm.

"Yes, thankfully. I was never so glad to see anybody, nevertheless! However did you find me?"

"We will tell you the whole on the return to Town, if you are able to make the journey? We should arrive in time, I think, for the celebrations."

"Nothing would please me more."

"It will be a tight squeeze, but I am sure we can contrive," he said as he walked across to the stable. Finding two wooden buckets, he filled them with water from the pump and carried them back to where they had left the phaeton. The horses made quick work of the proffered drink and then the little group drove back to Town. Kate leaned heavily against him, and despite her assurances, he was not certain she was well.

"My brother must have brought you here. Did he say why?" Maria asked once they were out on the open road again.

Kate shook her head as though she could not form her thoughts clearly. "I believe he said it was for my protection."

"So, he is indeed serving both sides?"

"He did not explain exactly, and seemed hesitant to say, but I suspect that is the case. Despite tying me up and drugging me, he did return to bring me food and then untie me."

"I cannot believe he would do this to you!"

"I am certain he has his reasons, but I cannot confess to being amused by it."

"You are too generous." Maria snorted. "I fully intend to pull caps with him when next I see him."

Jack shifted his position a little, that he could better handle the reins with Kate seated so close. "You may do with him what you will once we have discovered why he would do such a thing. I do not know him well, but I know enough to assume there has to have been a very good reason."



Kate was so grateful when she saw Jack that she forgot she was angry, forgot all the strictures of her teachers and threw herself at him—again.

She really ought to stop doing that, but now, sitting in the vehicle pressed close to him, she could not remember why. Her eyes were heavy and she wanted to sleep, but Jack and Maria were discussing the situation and she did not want to miss anything.

“Lady Maria, you were saying before we arrived that your brother was once an aide for General Newsom, were you not?”

“Yes, it was his first post in the army. Father arranged it for him.”

“Do he and Newsom have a close friendship?”

Kate looked at Maria, who was pursing her lips. “I believe they were once posted to India together. Father used to serve before he inherited the title, you know.”

“No, I did not,” Jack said in a voice that sounded as though he found the information interesting. Kate transferred her gaze to him and he smiled down at her.

“What else have I missed?” she asked.

“Not a great deal. Captain Owens and my brother were knighted this morning,” answered Maria. “That was when we discovered you were missing. He thought you had stayed with me and I thought you had returned home.”

Kate nodded. “I assumed that was what had happened. Your brother must have slipped a draught in my tea and then sent my maid away. I do not remember anything further until I awoke this morning.”

Jack growled beside her.

“I do not understand why he felt the need to abduct me now. What have I seen or heard that is so relevant to solving this mystery? I wish I might have a notion!”

“At least now I understand why your brother is involved in such a fashion,” Jack said to Maria. “If your father and Newsom are connected in some way, then perhaps there is something Major Lloyd knows of and is trying to keep secret.”

“It could be something he is trying to discover,” Maria argued.

Even to Kate’s ears, that sounded like a generous supposition. She kept trying to replay the conversations in her mind – hoping she might recall anything that would help unlock the secrets. Even though Major Lloyd had said the affair would all be over by tomorrow, she could not believe it would be so. Someone had tried to kill her because of what she had heard or what they thought she had heard.

“What do you think will happen tonight?”

“I hope proper precautions have been taken and nothing will happen. I fear there have been a lot of distractions from this situation

and I suspect it was intentional.”

“If Mr. Feathers was blackmailing General Newsom, then perhaps the stolen papers were not about Wellington’s strategy against Napoleon, but something regarding Newsom’s time in India.”

Kate noticed Jack loosen his grip on the reins. The leaders—a pair of mettlesome bays—took this as an instruction to increase their pace and sped forward. One of the wheelers stumbled, jerking both his fellow and the phaeton at a slight angle and all but pulling the ribbons from Jack’s grasp.

Maria uttered a tiny squeal as the carriage lurched and Kate, while remaining silent, clutched the edge of the seat between them. With an insouciant whistle to his lips, he neatly supported the wayward wheelers, steadied the leaders and, having effortlessly brought them back under control, patted Kate’s hand in what felt like a fatherly manner.

“My apologies, ladies,” he offered cheerfully. “Please blame my lack of attention on excitement. By Jove, Lady Maria, I suspect you are correct. It would make perfect sense and it is probably what the key would lead us to.”

“The key?” Kate asked.

“Yes, we found a key in Mr. Feathers’ possessions, but we have no idea what it unlocks.”

“I do not envy you the task of finding it,” Maria said.

They drove back into Town and arrived at Half Moon Street. “Thank you for your assistance today, Lady Maria. I trust I will see you at the celebrations this evening.”

“And Kate, will you permit her to attend?” Maria asked.

“I have not yet decided how to play that card. If your brother was truly only protecting her, then perhaps it would be best if no one knows we have found her.”

“Very well. Please keep me apprised if there is anything I may do to assist you.”

“All I need at the moment is for both of you to be safe, and to find the lock that the key opens.”

Jack helped Kate down from the phaeton and Maria drove away. It was a relief to be back inside the safety of Jack’s house. He led her inside and settled her on a sofa in the drawing room.

“What may I do for you, my dear? Unfortunately, I am expected shortly at the Park.”

She waved him off. “I am content to seek my bed.”

"Do you care to join me in the dining room after I have changed my dress? I thought to order a cold collation."

She gave a weary incline of her head. "If it pleases you. I shall rest here until then." Jack turned to leave and turned back.

"Kate, will you forgive me for being a mutton-headed clod?"

She looked down at her hands, folded in her lap, and twisted them together. Raising her eyes to his, she said, "You are already forgiven. I found I could not stay angry with you. Mind you do not do such a thing again, however, unless you mean it."

He walked over to her and took her hands. "I meant it, Kate. Never doubt that." He kissed her hands and marched from the room.

She was far too exhausted to appreciate the words properly and found herself nodding off on the sofa. In her subconscious mind, she was in a state of being half-awake and half-asleep. She kept replaying the events in her mind's eye but could not distinguish what was real or what was fantasy.

She would keep seeing a key and then be searching frantically with it, trying it in every lock she came across. Then she was suddenly transported to India and found herself walking through markets where all the clothes looked like Mr. Feathers' garish pieces.

There was something very familiar about it all, if she could but put her finger on it.

"Kate?" She could hear Jack's voice but her eyes refused to open.

"Kate? I expect you need the rest. I will have them leave a tray here for you, for when you wake up. I will be home soon," he said softly, kissing her forehead. Could she be dreaming it? Why would her eyes not open?

She slipped back into her dream-like state and was again searching for the lock that fit the key. Now Maria was with her and they were shopping on Bond Street. First, they went to the milliner's shop but there was no lock there in which to try the key.

Then they were surrounded by gloves and stockings and Kate was losing her patience with Maria as she had to try on every pair or touch every single item. Without warning, they were transported to a warehouse; it had shelves full of bolts and bolts of fabrics. Brightly colored silks in yellows, greens, reds, blues, and purples with intricate patterns were flowing through her fingers, and suddenly she was touching a flamingo-colored silk...

In the same instant, she sat straight up, fully awake.

"Mr. Feathers was at the silk warehouse that day!" Kate remembered

clearly then. She had seen him speaking with an Indian woman, but she had assumed he was buying more fabrics for his outlandish toilette. Could there be a connection? Kate contemplated what she should do. It would certainly be a good time to search, with everyone at the victory celebrations.

“Do not be ridiculous,” she scolded herself. Espying the dinner tray placed on a table near her, she took a slice of beef and put it on the plate provided. After a few bites of sirloin and a piece of bread and butter, she set her fork down and stood up. “I will just take a look to see if the key is even here,” she decided aloud, and walked across the hall to Jack’s study. To her chagrin, the top of the desk was tidy and held nothing more than an ink standish and a small clock.

She knew he would never approve of her going off to search somewhere alone, but supposing whatever the key unlocked held the evidence needed to prove treason? Thus rationalizing her actions, Kate searched the drawers, but found nothing remotely resembling a key. She sat down in the chair, feeling dejected.

“As though he would leave it lying about,” she muttered crossly. Should she, however, ignore his earlier dictum, and put herself in possible jeopardy, by going to the celebrations to tell him what she had remembered?



Chapter Twenty

Jack was almost late. He arrived on Adonis in the nick of time to take his place beside Philip, who gave him a look of exasperation. Fortunately, no one in the line of dignitaries in front of them seemed to notice.

“I do have a good explanation,” Jack said to Philip.

“Nothing that will affect the present, dare I say?”

“No, but I wish there was time for me to tell you the rest.”

“Then I suggest we turn our attention to protecting the Prince, after which we may consider the other problem.”

Jack looked out over the Park as they waited their turn to prance forward. It was a security nightmare, and a child’s dream. There was a sea of uniforms, with thousands of troops lined up in formation. The evening had been advertised as a family entertainment, with arcades, ale tents and vendors with stalls offering food, toys and games for everyone’s delight. Acrobats performed on swings and roundabouts, while the military band blew their tunes and the tavern taps overflowed.

If someone truly wanted the Prince dead, it would only take one well-placed shot. Jennings was certainly capable of such a mark, but why? Was being cast out of the army and England enough to cause such vitriol against her oft-ridiculed ruler?

“Have you discovered anything more on Jennings?” Jack asked Philip, noticing that Major Knight was also listening. Major Lloyd was at the far end of the foursome, and looked wholly in another world. Jack inclined his head toward Felix.

“Knight tracked him to a small hovel in Seven Dials, but he escaped.”

Jack cursed and Knight shook his head. “He left behind a small arsenal.”

“Then we must hope his aim is off, if that is his intention.”

The command was given and their formation moved forward before the crowd, to the cheers of the people.

A reenactment of the Battle of Trafalgar ensued on the Serpentine.

Miniature recreations of sailing ships fought out England's famous victory, which ended with them all being sunk. There was not a soldier or sailor who did not have to steel his nerves against such a display, for it instantly transported them back to the battlefield. As the national anthem began to play in the distance of Jack's subconsciousness, he saw Major Lloyd charge off on his horse toward the trees.

"Did he see something?"

"I could not say." Knight followed in hot pursuit, while Jack and Philip stayed to guard the Prince.

Wellington looked at them with a question on his face.

Philip gave a little shake of his head and Wellington turned back and whispered to the Prince.

Jack surveyed the crowd again; most appeared enamored of the display and fair which were going forward for their amusement.

He found Lady Maria, next to her mother, in the crowd. Instead of the display, Maria was watching where her brother had gone with great interest. Jack stayed at his post, even though he wished to find out what was happening; then the fireworks display began.

There were twelve-thousand troops on the parade ground and, Jack would wager, not one did not cringe when the explosions started. His attention was centered on the crowd where a shot could be taken from, as Prinny's back and sides were well protected. Only a few more minutes of this, he prayed and then the Prince's protection would be someone else's responsibility.

The cracks and pops of loud explosions, followed by sizzling light in the evening sky, seemed to drag on and on. When a brief silence finally followed and the crowd sighed collectively with disappointment at the end, a loud disturbance erupted amongst the trees where Lloyd and Knight had disappeared.

Jack and Philip galloped off as soon as Wellington gave them the nod. They reached the trees and quickly dismounted, tossing the reins to some nearby infantrymen.

"Manage the crowd!" Philip called to the soldiers.

He and Jack ran then, hastily ducking branches, and found Lloyd and Jennings scuffling, with Knight trying to pull them apart.

They at once rushed to assist and soon had the two men separated. Naturally, since the fireworks had ceased, the crowd began to gather around them, eager to see what the next diversion was. Jack uttered a few choice epithets and hoped some of the troops would be able to push them back in quick order.

He surveyed the area and tried to assess the situation. Jennings appeared to be alone, but there was a cache of rifles and ammunition beneath a tree. He looked up to see the perfect branch for a sharpshooter. It was now dark and difficult to fully ascertain the position.

“Seize him and take him to the barracks!” Major Lloyd commanded.

“On what grounds?” Jennings asked breathlessly.

Anyone who knew the name knew who he was, but it would take time to prove and he looked anything but a soldier. With long, grey hair and shaggy beard, he resembled a street beggar. The longer he could delay, of course, the better his chances of escape—especially if Newsom was behind this plot. Were that the case, Jennings’ chances of escape were excellent.

“The game is over, Jennings,” Lloyd spat. “Besides desertion, you have now tried to assassinate the Prince Regent!”

Jennings tried to wrestle away from Philip and Jack, but between them they were able to subdue him.

Newsom arrived then, looking harried and out of breath. “What is the meaning of this?” He turned toward the crowd. “There is nothing to see here. Merely a deserter! Form a barrier, now!” he shouted to the soldiers standing nearby, also gawking.

Jack was quite certain that would only tempt the crowd to have a better look.

“Tell them the truth!” Jennings shouted at Newsom, while again beginning to fight against their hold. He clearly sensed he was about to be made the scapegoat. “I am not the traitor! ’Twas not the Prince I was aiming for!”

Becoming restless, the crowd grew louder and shouted for more.

“Silence him! Take him to the barracks, now!” Newsom shouted. The people’s control was held only by a thin thread.

“Tell them!” Jennings taunted, sensing he had the upper hand despite the bonds holding him back.

“Take him now!” the general commanded, his face as red as his scarlet uniform. He turned to the mob and tried a different tactic. “There is nothing to tell but the wild stories he has conjectured in his mind whilst in prison.”

“There are documents that tell of the treason of four men!” At this, Jack and Philip’s gazes met over Jennings’s shoulders. This was what they needed to hear, but it was in the worst place possible.

Knight had released Lloyd and come to assist with binding Jennings’s

hands and feet. They began to drag him away and the barrier of troops parted to make way for them.

“Treason and murder, I tell you! It happened in India!” Jennings made one last, desperate attempt to be heard. “General Newsom is a murderer!”

The mob began to shout for blood and demand Newsom’s neck.

“Nonsense! This is all a misunderstanding. I have proof!” Somehow, he managed to shout above the noise of the crowd. He pointed at Lloyd. “He is the real traitor!”

There was a collective gasp and Jack’s heart sank. He knew it was not the truth, but the public accusation would cause damage enough.

Lloyd stood still but said nothing as the assembled waited for a denial. There was none. All he did was shake his head and disappear into the throng. Knight followed him.

In the same moments, Newsom bellowed, “Coward!”

Jack and Philip led Jennings through the parted crowd, the prisoner now being more cooperative. As Jack scanned about, looking for the horses, he spied Lady Maria, watching with Kate. What the devil was she doing there? He tried to catch his ward’s attention, but she did not even seem to see him. For a moment, he almost abandoned Philip to deal with Jennings, but it would not be right. He had no alternative but to hope Kate would be able to take care of herself.



Kate arrived at the Park just in time to witness the altercation between Lloyd and Jennings. She did not know what to believe, but as she listened to it all, especially when Jennings mentioned India, scenes began to flash through her mind. Bits and pieces of memories bombarded her. She kept seeing her parents arguing with someone. They were shouting from the other room and she remembered climbing out of her bed, through mosquito netting, to go downstairs and see what the fuss was about.

“I cannot let you succeed in this,” her father said to a gentleman she could not place, though he seemed familiar.

“You have to take sides, Harrington,” the other gentleman said.

“As far as I am concerned, we are all on the same side – the side of England. I cannot allow you to implicate Wellesley for such a thing, when he had no part in it!”

“That is a shame, because I will not take the blame for it.”

"But you must. You killed Smythe today and his son was left orphaned."

"It was a matter of honor!" the other argued, spreading his hands outwards in exasperation.

Her father shook his head. "Whose honor? You killed a man because you did not approve of his marriage to a local girl."

"I can see you will not be reasoned with," the gentleman said, and turning sideways, revealed a familiar profile. He had more hair, and his whiskers were brown, but Kate had no doubt it was Newsom.

Was this all some elaborate plot Newsom had fabricated to get rid of Wellington, not the Prince? Was it all a matter of jealousy? Even in India, all those years ago, Wellesley had been in a high position—but was there bad blood there because of it?

Kate closed her eyes and tried to remember more.

"Give me the papers!" Newsom had demanded of her father.

Papa shook his head. "I cannot do that, Reginald. I have already written the account and sent them along with the other dispatches. Mottram also saw the whole."

"Mottram agrees with me!"

"Perhaps his honor can be bought, but mine cannot. Now leave." Her father turned toward the door.

Newsom growled with rage and leaped at her father. It was not a fair fight, as Kate saw the blade flash in the candlelight before it descended.

She gasped. Her father had been murdered! But what of her mother?

Painful as it was, she forced herself back to that time, fourteen years before.

Her mother had run into the room, screaming at Newsom and for her father as he gasped for air and breathed his last.

"It was an accident!" Newsom cried.

"You are evil!" her mother screamed. "What am I supposed to do now?" she wailed.

"I will take care of you, Sylvia. You and the girl."

"In the same way, sir, whereby you intend to take care of Neville Smythe?"

"That is different! He is a bastard!"

"They were married, albeit not in the Anglican church," she argued.

Newsom spat. "She is a harlot and nothing more."

"She is a native of this land, so you and the others thought she was your plaything!" Kate could not remember her mother ever being so angry. She watched, in horror, as Newsom hit her mother hard, causing

her to fall on the floor beside her husband. “No!” she cried, glancing to where Kate stood in the doorway. Subtly, she shook her head at Kate.

Young as she was, Kate realized her mother did not wish to draw attention to her.

“You are forcing me to do this, Sylvia. I would have taken you as my own and protected you,” Newsom said, slowly drawing the blade again.

Kate could watch no longer. She turned and ran out of the house and hid in some nearby bushes in the garden behind the house. A few minutes later, the house went up in smoke and she watched for hours while the servants emerged and then the villagers attempted to put out the fire. She stayed where she was until the house was nothing but a pile of ashes.

Soon after that, she was on a ship with her nurse, headed back to England.

“Kate! Kate!” She started. Realizing she had been lost in memories, struggled to recall where she was.

“What has happened?” Maria demanded.

“I have just remembered something—something very important.”

“What is it?”

“I think we should find Captain Owens and Captain Everleigh,” Kate said softly. No wonder someone wanted her dead. They must know who she was and what she had seen. How could she have forgotten all of that?

“I suspect they have gone to the barracks with Jennings.” Maria looked around them. “It would appear my mother and father are leaving as well. Mayhap they propose to find Gabriel.”

“You should go with them. I will make my own way.”

Maria hesitated. “I daresay there is little risk to you now. Did your maid accompany you?”

“Yes, she is waiting over by the Cheesecake House.”

“Then I will go and try to comfort Mother. I will call on you in the morning.”

Kate watched Maria leave and stood watching as the crowd dispersed to the various entertainments around the Park. She was trembling inside and did not know what to do. Going to the barracks was not an option, and Kate still had no proof of Newsom’s villainy, nor yet could she put all the pieces of the puzzle together.

She passed a vendor selling pies, but was only peripherally aware. Someone bumped into her broken arm and the pain from that was

enough to make her wince and stop.

"The key," she said out loud. Surely the key had to be wherever the missing documents were being held. They must have been what was stolen, presumably because they could implicate Newsom, and possibly Lord Mottram. It had to be that information Lloyd had been trying to find and protect. "Poor Maria," she whispered.

What she could not piece together was where Jennings and Feathers fitted into the conundrum. From the way Jennings spoke, he must have been in India when the murders happened.

Could Feathers have been the child her father and Newsom had been speaking about?

She wished she had the key so she could search. She continued walking, deep in thought and concentration, trying to sort through her new memories. She had been known as a Rafferty since returning to England. Her nurse had insisted upon it, so had she been privy to the truth?

Kate could hardly ask her now. She had returned to India after conveying Kate to school. Kate cried herself to sleep for weeks, feeling abandoned by the only connection to her parents and India she had left. She had lost everyone she'd loved in a short time.

Perhaps, Kate wondered, her arrival had caused events to escalate. She certainly felt partially responsible for Feathers' death. Had she known him as a child? She could not bring him to mind. Smythe was certainly not the only one to have used village women, but marriage to the local people was forbidden. Even Kate remembered that.

Perhaps she had been disturbed by Feathers because he stirred long-suppressed memories and pain.

Hopefully her remembrances would fit together with other information her guardian and Lord Philip had discovered. She looked up and was astonished to see how far she had walked. She was standing in front of the silk emporium in Cheapside.

It was dark and Kate knew she should not be there alone. Certainly, she had not meant to venture out. Simpson would be beside herself if she realized Kate had left the Park alone. What was it about this place? Was it because she had unexpectedly seen Mr. Feathers there? Or because it made her think of India? It was unremarkable from the outside, but perhaps there was a link. She sighed. There was little she could do that night and she did not even have the all-important key were she able to break in and somehow find a lock in the dark. She looked around her, trying to be inconspicuous, but she was tired and

wanted to be back in Half Moon Street when Jack returned. She hailed a hack and climbed in.



Chapter Twenty-One

By the time Jack and Philip arrived at the barracks, Wellington had already instructed Newsom to be taken away from the proceedings.

“Since he is the one Jennings first accused, I want to hear Jennings give his version of events without Newsom intimidating or interrupting,” Wellington explained. “I have also asked Lloyd to be absent for now, but he is nearby, under the supervision of Major Knight. Shall we hear what Jennings has to say?”

Jack and Philip followed Wellington into a plain, rectangular room where Jennings was seated in a chair under guard.

“You may leave us for now,” Wellington said to the soldier.

The duke sat at a table across the room and folded his hands before him. Jack and Philip remained standing.

“It has been a long time, Jennings. I assume you have a good explanation for your conduct?”

“I will only speak if I am guaranteed a pardon,” Jennings said.

Wellington remained as calm and cool as ever. Newsom was intelligent, but did not have the air of calm confidence about him that Wellington did.

“If you will give me the proof of who committed treason and murder, and that person is not yourself, then I will speak to the Prince on your behalf. That is the best I can guarantee you.”

Jennings thought for a moment. “I suppose that is the best I can hope for. At least you do not offer me false promises, as Newsom did.”

They all waited. Silence compelled more men to speak than any other method.

“I was in India, as you recall, sir.”

Wellington inclined his head indicating he did.

“I was Newsom’s sergeant back then. He and Smythe fought a duel of sorts over a village woman. Smythe had married her and she had borne a son. Newsom thought to take the woman as his whore whenever it was his fancy to do so. Typically, this was whenever Smythe was away.”

Jack and Philip exchanged glances. They both knew where this was leading.

“One night, Newsom had me stand guard while he had his way with Mrs. Smythe. Smythe came home and found them; the two men fought and Newsom killed him.”

“I knew of the death, but not the circumstances,” Wellington responded thoughtfully.

“It was covered up, but Mottram knew the truth, as well as Harrington.”

“Harrington?” Wellington interrupted. “I have not heard that name in almost fifteen years. He and his wife died in a fire. Are you telling me that was no accident?”

“Yes sir. I did not witness the murder, but I heard it. I was waiting for Newsom outside, on the porch. Harrington said he would not cover it up and had already written an account of the offenses to be sent off with the dispatches to England. Because of Newsom’s rank, it had to be dealt with by the War Office. I believe Harrington would have held him in prison if not for Mottram.”

“What has Mottram to say to this? Is that why Newsom accused Lloyd in the Park? And why did you agree to go along with this complicity?”

“Newsom offered to buy me a commission, if you recall. I was made a captain for my silence, which is no small thing for a man like me.”

“A captaincy which you later deserted,” Wellington said coldly. “Then, I gather, you blackmailed him?”

“It was a small price to pay for my silence. I could not bring Smythe or the Harringtons back to life, now, could I?”

“And now?”

Jennings shrugged. “He was paying well.”

Jack and Philip were awaiting their turn. Wellington looked up at them and gave a slight nod.

“Where does Feathers come into the piece?” Jack asked.

“Feathers’ original name was Neville Smythe. He was the son of the one Newsom murdered. He was brought back to England and placed with a family, to be brought up as their own.”

“At some point, he then discovered or remembered who he was.”

“Aye. A few months back, he started to blackmail Newsom. I cannot say why he waited until then. He bled Newsom and his brother dry, though.”

“Did Lord Worth know of this?”

“How much he knew I cannot tell you, but ’tis my belief he wanted to keep the family’s name clear.”

“The stolen documents—did Feathers take those? I presume they were the accounts Harrington wrote of the incident in India?” Philip asked.

“That is what Newsom believed. I never saw them,” Jennings answered.

“How was such a report overlooked?” Wellington shook his head. “I have no desire to know why it happened, but we have need of the documents now, for proof. Have you any idea where Feathers kept them?”

“No, and I have been searching for them for weeks,” Jennings answered.

Wellington pursed his lips. “Should I find the proof, there is still one more thing I wish to know before you may be released. You were found with a cache of weapons and ammunition in the Park. Why were you trying to assassinate the Prince? No word of acquittal I put in for you will exonerate you from that.”

“No, sir. You were the one. Newsom paid me to kill you, not the Prince.”

“I beg your pardon?” Wellington asked calmly.

“He was always jealous of you, sir. He had hoped to find a way to implicate you in Smythe’s murder.”

“Yet did not Harrington foil that? Is that not why he was killed?”

“I believe Mottram was to thank for that. He told Newsom he would keep mum but the scrap had to stop there.”

Wellington blew out a long breath. “Why, however, has this resurged now? He is the head of the War Department! Why would he still want to best me?”

Jennings barked a harsh laugh. “With all due respect, sir, consider what was just taking place in the Park—the victory celebrations. Your victory. No one even knows who Newsom is.”

Jack smiled inwardly. What Jennings said was true.

“If I recall, you were our best marksman. You could have shot me any number of times had you wished. You did not take that shot tonight. Why?” Wellington asked.

“It seems even deserters have their own code of honor,” the man said with a shrug. “You had never done me any harm.”

Wellington gave Jennings a small salute and left the room. As Jack and Philip followed, Philip instructed the guard outside the door to

detain Jennings until further notice.

They left Whitehall and went to the mews to retrieve their mounts. Once they were trotting back toward Mayfair, Philip finally spoke. "Do you share my feeling there is still a piece missing?"

"I do, and I strongly feel that it involves my ward."

"You saw her at the Park tonight, I conjecture?" Philip remarked.

"I did, and she had better be tucked up safely in her bed as we speak."

"Shall I come with you? Are you afraid Newsom will again try to hurt her?"

"No, I think this is best left to me. I will let you know in the morning if I find anything of use."

"Best of luck, old chap," Philip said with a smirk as he pulled Cicero away in the direction of Mottram Place.

Jack took Adonis to the stable himself, using the time taken in removing the saddle and rubbing down the horse to think.

Kate had once mentioned she had lived in India. The timing would be right, but what was the connection? He stopped in mid-brush and Adonis objected by turning to nuzzle his arm. Recalling that the name Harrington had been used on the report signed by the steward at the time Kate was acting in that capacity, he cursed as everything suddenly made sense. "Kate's father was Colonel Harrington," he informed the horse. Smoothly finishing the brushstroke and his task, he patted Adonis and went into the house.

Kate was waiting for him, sitting in a chair by the fire in his study.

She had been crying. Her eyes were red-rimmed and swollen, and his heart ached so much for her that he knew he could never leave her.



Kate had spent the last two hours crying, remembering her parents and what had happened. She must have blocked it from her memories, and now she was making up for fifteen years of grieving for them. She was also anxious about what was happening at the barracks. Was the truth finally coming out? Or would Newsom find a way to put the blame on yet another person?

Kate failed to understand why such a man as Newsom could be the way he was. Outwardly, it appeared he had so much – family, connections and a successful military career. However, being a second son and always second to Wellington had obviously allowed jealousy to

take root and become his obsession.

When she heard Jack return home at last, she stayed where she was. He would see her. She had had hours to think of what to say, but now that he was here, she did not know where to begin.

When he finally stood in the doorway, looking tired, yet still the most handsome man she had ever seen, she knew that everything would be well. Certainly, she would not let him go without a fight.

He walked over to her and kneeled before her. She leaned forward and embraced him, tears escaping yet again. She was so grateful to have found him, and he understood.

"I know, Kate," he whispered in her ear.

"India," she said through her tears. "He killed them. I watched Newsom kill my parents."

"Yes, and we will make him pay."

"Do you still have the key?" she asked, drying her tears now that she had said the words.

He reached into his breast pocket and withdrew a small iron object. "Why? Have you discovered what it opens?"

"No, but I think I know where it might be. It is just a notion I had."

"Is it something that can wait until morning?"

"Unless you would like to break into a silk emporium in Cheapside, in the dark."

He was perplexed, and it must have shown on his face. She wiped away his furrowed brow and leaned forward to kiss him. Their lips met and it felt like fire, but it was much more than a kiss. It was an unspoken vow of more to come; of a lifetime together.

She pulled back and pressed her forehead to his. "We *shall* marry," she stated, as a matter of fact.

Jack laughed. "I might take more convincing," he murmured. Leaning forward, he claimed another kiss.

"I warn you, sir, I may have to tell my guardian that a rogue has been stealing kisses before marriage."

"Who is the blackguard? I know how to deal with such a villain. You should stay far away from him."

"You will have to force him to marry me," she muttered saucily.

"If you insist," he said, then attempted to make her lose her wits entirely. He almost succeeded.

The next morning, Kate awoke and smiled at her canopy, remembering that Jack had agreed to marry her. She also recalled what had

transpired before and her remembrances, but she knew he would help her deal with the past. First, they must find the proof.

She called for Simpson and again dressed in her green military riding habit. She was feeling very official and it suited her colouring. She went downstairs and found Jack, dressed in his uniform, waiting for her in the breakfast room.

"Good morning," she said, smiling shyly.

He came to her and kissed her on the cheek. "I will apply for a special license once our task this morning is complete."

She looked askance at him. "A special license?"

"Oh, yes. Aunt Hattie is not enough to protect you from the lecherous rogue."

Kate laughed as he seated her at the table and they shared a breakfast of kippers, potatoes, sausages and eggs.

"I could get used to this," he said over his coffee cup.

"I should hope so," she retorted in a sarcastic tone.

With a dramatic flourish, he put down his cup and glared at the ceiling. "It was supposed to be a compliment."

"We will work on your tact later." She stood up and smoothed her skirts. "Now, let us see if my instincts are correct about the key."

Jack consulted his watch. "Philip and Felix should be here at any moment. I asked them to accompany us. I sent notes to both of them, explaining our errand. They both know what transpired with respect to your parents."

Kate nodded, her throat again constricting with grief. Swallowing hard, she controlled her emotions while they waited. Within five minutes, Captain Everleigh and Major Knight had arrived.

"Why are we visiting a silk emporium? I certainly would never have guessed that," Lord Philip remarked.

"I cannot be sure," Kate answered, "but Lady Maria and I came upon Mr. Feathers there. While his costumes explain his being there, his behavior did not. I had strong feelings while there, and somehow, I found myself in front of the building last night, after someone bumped my arm in the Park. All the remembrances I had shut away, about my parents and India, suddenly overtook my senses." Kate avoided looking at Jack, who would be angry with her for going there alone, she knew.

"It is a better guess than any I have had," Major Knight remarked.

"It turns out Feathers' mother was Indian, so perhaps there is a connection. Could he have owned the place?"

"It is a possibility we can look into later. Shall we go before the

polite world awakens?" Lord Philip asked.

It was still too early for the fashionable to be abroad when they arrived in Cheapside. Nevertheless, merchants opened their doors at such an hour for business with the working class and with other merchants.

Jack whistled once they were inside the warehouse. Bolts and bolts of fine silks, and tables and tables of cottons, muslins and other fabrics filled the room with bright colors. "It looks like Mr. Feathers' wardrobe," he remarked in an offhanded manner.

Kate ignored him and walked toward the back of the building. A small staircase led to the upper floor, where the offices were situated.

The gentlemen followed her lead. She knocked on a glass door, and a small Indian woman opened it. At first, she looked confused at the entourage of soldiers before her, but then she looked at Kate. "Miss Harrington?"

Kate studied the woman more closely at the use of her true surname. "Madhuri?" she queried. The woman had been a friend of her mother's.

"Yes, 'tis I!" She kissed each of Kate's cheeks. "You are as beautiful as your mother. What may I do for you?"

"This is Major Knight, Captain Owens and Captain Everleigh," Kate responded, indicating each gentleman in turn. "Unfortunately, we come on an errand. We are seeking a safe box or some other place Neville might have hidden something. Neville was your son, was he not?"

Madhuri's gaze fell to the floor. "Yes, he was. You have come looking for the documents. I knew he would come to a bad end, but he had revenge eating away inside him and he could not let it go." She turned, and walking to another door, indicated for them to follow. She led them through what appeared to be her private apartments. There were several rooms including a sitting room, which looked much like those Kate remembered from her childhood. Behind the farthest door was a strong-box.

Kate held out the key; Madhuri placed it into the lock and with a click, it turned. She removed a folio and handed it to Captain Owens. "I hope this will finally see Newsom punished for what he has done. It is not right for one man to hold dominion over people's lives in the way he has done."

The gentlemen took the papers back into the sitting room to study them. Kate took Madhuri's hand and led her to a sofa. "Are you well taken care of here? Is there anything you need?"

"I am happy enough here, although I miss Neville terribly."

"I infer that you know what happened to him?"

The older woman nodded. "I could feel it in here," she said, pointing to her chest. "The game he played was very dangerous."

"Did he own this warehouse?" Kate asked.

"No." Madhuri half-smiled; even through her grief she looked proud. "It was how he found me again. He was taken from me as a child and brought back to England. When I was able, I came here to find him. I will be comfortable in my old age, *priya*," she said, squeezing Kate's hand. "You will come to me when you marry."

Kate looked astonished.

"Your love is written on your face. It will be soon, then?"

"I hope so. He must return to the Continent to fulfill his duties."

"Then I shall prepare a gift for you. Come back here before you leave."

Kate embraced Madhuri and found the gentlemen were waiting for her. As they walked out of the emporium and then rode back to Mayfair, Kate listened with half an ear to their discussion of what they had found. When they duly arrived in Half Moon Street, the friends found a visitor waiting for them in the drawing room.

"Sir!" Captain Owens said with surprise when they entered and found the Duke of Wellington sitting in an armchair, partaking of a cup of coffee. He stood and bowed before Kate.

"Forgive the unexpected call, but I wanted to inform you all that Newsom was found dead this morning, apparently by his own hand."

"The coward," Jack growled. He handed the leather folio to the duke. "Thanks to Miss Rafferty—or should I say Harrington?—we were able to find the proof against him."

Wellington looked at her with a smile. "I knew there was something familiar about you."

"At least Kate will have one old acquaintance in Paris, then," Jack drawled.

"Why am I not surprised you would end by marrying your ward, Owens?" Wellington shook his head. "Then I shall offer my congratulations and welcome you to our little tribe. Are you certain you can stomach the lot of us?"

"Clearly, Your Grace, you never had the fortune to meet Jack's grandmother," Kate answered with a smile.



Epilogue

“Winterbourne is not exactly my ideal destination for a wedding trip,” Jack mused aloud.

“Perhaps not, but it has to be visited before you return to the Continent,” Kate argued.

“Must you always be reasonable?” He looked at her with mock exasperation.

“I must, otherwise, you would not now be my husband.” She leaned forward and planted a kiss on his cheek.

“Then let it be noted I am an advocate of the art.”

They exchanged smiles and the carriage rolled on for a few more miles while they watched the passing landscape in silence save the creak of the carriage and clip-clop of the hooves. The countryside gave way from thick woods into the vast hills and desolate moors that defined much of Yorkshire. Jack tried not to give way to the stress and anxiousness he felt at returning to a place he would rather see burned to the ground than standing. It was only for a fortnight, he reminded himself.

“What will happen to Lloyd?” Kate asked unexpectedly, redirecting his thoughts.

“He was acting in the best interests of his family. He suspected his father. I think any of us would have tried to resolve the situation on our own in order to protect our family.”

“Will there be lenience?”

“I think for Lloyd, yes, but for Lord Mottram, I could not say. Even if the old scandal is swept under the rug, it was a very public accusation made.”

“Even though Newsom was the murderer?”

“I suspect in time it will pass, but there will always be some taint of scandal.”

“Poor Maria. Perhaps she would accompany us to the Continent to divert her for a while. I cannot think she would prefer isolation in the

country. She loves town life.”

“I will happily speak to Wellington to see if he would object to her coming along as your companion. I cannot think he would, especially if Lloyd returns with us. It is not London, but there is some Society, especially whilst in Paris.”

“I will write and ask her. I would think distance from England might be welcome. And with Lord Philip standing her friend, it can only help.”

They were nearing the village, and he observed workers out in the fields. Were those now his fields? Somehow, the village also seemed brighter and more cheerful as they passed through. Was it his imagination or was it because he knew he would not have to see his grandmother? The church bells rang as they slowed as though welcoming them home.

The carriage turned through the gates of the old estate and Jack felt a sense of dread. Kate, perhaps sensing his thoughts, took one of his hands in hers. “All will be well. She is no longer here, remember.”

“Her spirit haunts me; I am certain of it.” Nevertheless, Kate was correct. His grandmother was no longer there and he was no longer a child.

“You must acknowledge she did one good thing.”

“Must I admit it aloud? Is it not enough that you are Mrs. Owens?”

Kate only laughed and he could not help but return a smile. He looked out of the window, and was filled with astonishment and a large lump in his throat. “I do believe our coachman has turned into the wrong place.”

Kate was silent as he took everything in. She must know what he was expecting, despite being assured that the estate had been refurbished as it once had been. The trees had been trimmed and instead of foreboding, now presented a welcoming formation that opened up into a beautiful vista. The lake, which before had seemed like a murky swamp, also appeared to be clean and inviting. The house – he swallowed hard – had had all of the old shrubbery and climbing ivy cut away and now looked like an entirely different building.

“Are you not pleased?” Kate asked with a worried look when he turned to her. “You do not look happy,” she explained.

“Of course, I am pleased! I am overwhelmed. It is beyond expectations, dear wife.”

“That is a relief,” she said, visibly relaxing. “I hope you will also approve of the changes inside.”

“Anything will be better than when I saw it last,” he added dryly.

A few servants were outside, waiting upon their arrival. "That is very kind of them," Kate said as she stepped down from the carriage.

"Welcome home, Captain and Mrs. Owens," Mrs. Dewey said, stepping forward to greet them, alongside Weathersby, who had made the journey ahead of them. "May I say how pleased we all are to see you joined together?"

Jack felt his cheeks warm. He stepped forward and kissed Mrs. Dewey on the cheek. She had been the one person with whom he could seek reprieve when his grandmother had had one of her fits against him. "I am so happy you stayed," he said softly into her ear, causing her to blush.

"You are still a rogue."

He made her a bow. "As you see."

"Come inside. Cook has prepared a repast for you when you are ready."

If Jack thought the changes outside were remarkable, then the inside was astonishing. It had gone from a dark and dismal Gothic pile to a bright and cheerful haven.

"How is this possible?" Jack asked as he turned around in a circle. The bright sunshine came in through the windows, bringing the outside life in.

"Truly, Husband, it is just paint and new draperies."

"And you did all of this whilst my grandmother was still here?" he asked doubtfully.

"Well, not all of it. Only the parts of the house into which she never ventured. The rest we completed after her death, during mourning."

Jack laughed and proceeded to pick her up and twirl her about. "You have wrought a miracle, my dear girl."

"I have, have I not?" she answered with a mischievous grin. "Come, see your chambers."

"Then I would like to ride about the estate. I saw some of the changes as we drove in," he said as they climbed the wooden staircase.

"I doubt those changes will be so obvious as these."

As they entered the sitting room, the servants were bringing in a lavishly painted trunk that had been sent to the town house just before they'd left for Winterbourne.

"What did Madhuri send you? I have been dying to look inside that trunk."

Kate smiled. "Curiosity from you?"

"I know, I know. But in this case, I have a strong suspicion of what is

in there.”

Kate leaned forward. “I peeked,” she said with a cheeky grin. “If you behave, I might show you later.”

“Later? You cannot be serious! It is our wedding trip. Why would you punish me so?”

She only laughed at him, so he followed her into her chambers.

“Jack,” she scolded. “I thought you wanted to ride about the estate?”

“I do, but now you have me burning with curiosity to see what Madhuri sent.”

“It is only clothes,” she said dismissively.

“Am I not allowed to see them, then?”

“I suppose a little peek would not hurt. I did not think men cared for such things. Unless you’re Mr. Feathers, that is, God rest his soul.”

Jack sat in the chair in the sitting room Kate had redone. It was done in cream and pale blue with gold accents. It felt very Parisian and it suited her.

Kate lifted the lid to the trunk and gasped. She pulled out an opulent silk in a shade of blue that reminded him of peacock feathers. But it was not a dress.

“What is it?” he asked, intrigued.

“It is a sari. It is what an Indian woman might wear to a wedding or ball.”

“Try it on for me.”

She gave him a look like a displeased tutor.

“Please?” he begged.

She walked behind a screen and after several minutes she emerged looking like a dream, and more beautiful than he deserved. He was speechless.

“Well?” She turned in a circle.

“How do men in India ever get anything done?”

Kate laughed. “It is rather revealing.”

“I should say so. I forbid you to wear this for anyone but me.”

He reached out to pull her to him but she shook her finger at him. “Being married does not mean behaving like a naughty schoolboy whenever you like.”

“It absolutely does,” he objected. “That is the whole benefit of having a wife!”

“Would you like to rethink that statement?” She put her hands on her bare midriff.

“I would like to do many things, but *think* is not one of them.”

She threw a pillow at him.

"You must admit you are temptation wrapped in silk."

"I forgive you this time," she said as she walked behind the screen again.

Jack tried not to think about what she was doing behind the screen. "What else is in that trunk?"

"The rest are dresses. English dresses. And if you behave, perhaps I will show you more later."

She emerged looking prim and proper once again, and he repressed a sigh of disappointment.

After they had refreshed themselves and eaten, Jack wanted to take a tour of the estate. The outdoors had been his refuge whilst living here, and he had spent hours and hours riding each day, hoping to escape into the cavalry. That much he had achieved, but now he could envision settling down to a life with Kate, there at Winterbourne.

A groom had saddled horses for them and once mounted, they set off at a comfortable pace across the fields.

"What are you thinking?" Kate asked, interrupting his reminiscing when they stopped at the top of a hill which overlooked the village.

"I was thinking that I look forward to building a life here with you."

"What does that mean? I thought we were to leave for Paris in a few days."

"Yes, I have a commitment to fulfill, but it will not be ere long until little ones come along and I would not wish you to endure the hardships of following the drum and bringing up the children in the field."

She was looking at him with disbelief writ large upon her face.

"Well, not actually in a field. It is a general term," he teased.

"Heaven help me." Gazing aloft as though to emphasize her words, she then urged her mare forward. Jack chased after her with laughter and a curious feeling in his heart.

They stopped at the river, dismounted and enjoyed the privacy along the bank. When they were lying in each other's arms, staring at the sky, Jack could contain his joy no longer. "I think we should rename the estate."

Kate lifted her head and looked at him. "Does that mean you intend to keep it?"

"We will need a place to return to."

She shrugged as though she were indifferent. "Whatever you wish."

Jack suspected she was not at all indifferent, but wanted the decision to be his. "Winterbourne was such a fitting name before. It was dark,

bleak, and dreary. It always seemed as though spring and summer would never come here.”

“Mm.” She intoned her understanding. “What do you think to rename it? Summerbourne?”

Jack laughed. “It does sound a bit odd. Rebourne is a bit too religious.” He paused, thinking. “Redbourne, for your glorious hair. I do hope our children will have it,” he said admiringly as he ran his fingers through her silken locks.

“Now you are being ridiculous,” she scolded. “Do you know, Husband, when I first met you, I suspected there were hidden depths to you.”

“Oh? And now your opinion has changed? You take me for a shallow fool?” He sat up on one elbow and looked down at her with incredulousness.

She was not impressed. “I thought your insouciance was a façade—that you were somehow dangerous beneath.”

It was a compliment, he supposed. “And now?”

“Now I know you are.”

“Then let us keep that our little secret.”

About the Author

Like many writers, Elizabeth Johns was first an avid reader, though she was a reluctant convert. It was Jane Austen's clever wit and unique turn of phrase that hooked Johns when she was "forced" to read *Pride and Prejudice* for a school assignment. She began writing when she ran out of her favorite author's books and decided to try her hand at crafting a Regency romance novel. Her journey into publishing began with the release of *Surrender the Past*, book one of the Loring-Abbott Series. Johns makes no pretensions to Austen's wit but hopes readers will perhaps laugh and find some enjoyment in her writing.

Johns attributes much of her inspiration to her mother, a former English teacher. During their last summer together, Johns would sit on the porch swing and read her stories to her mother, who encouraged her to continue writing. Busy with multiple careers, including a professional job in the medical field, author and mother of two children, Johns squeezes in time for reading whenever possible.